Infinity

SCIENCE FICTION

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JUNE

"The Guests of Chance"

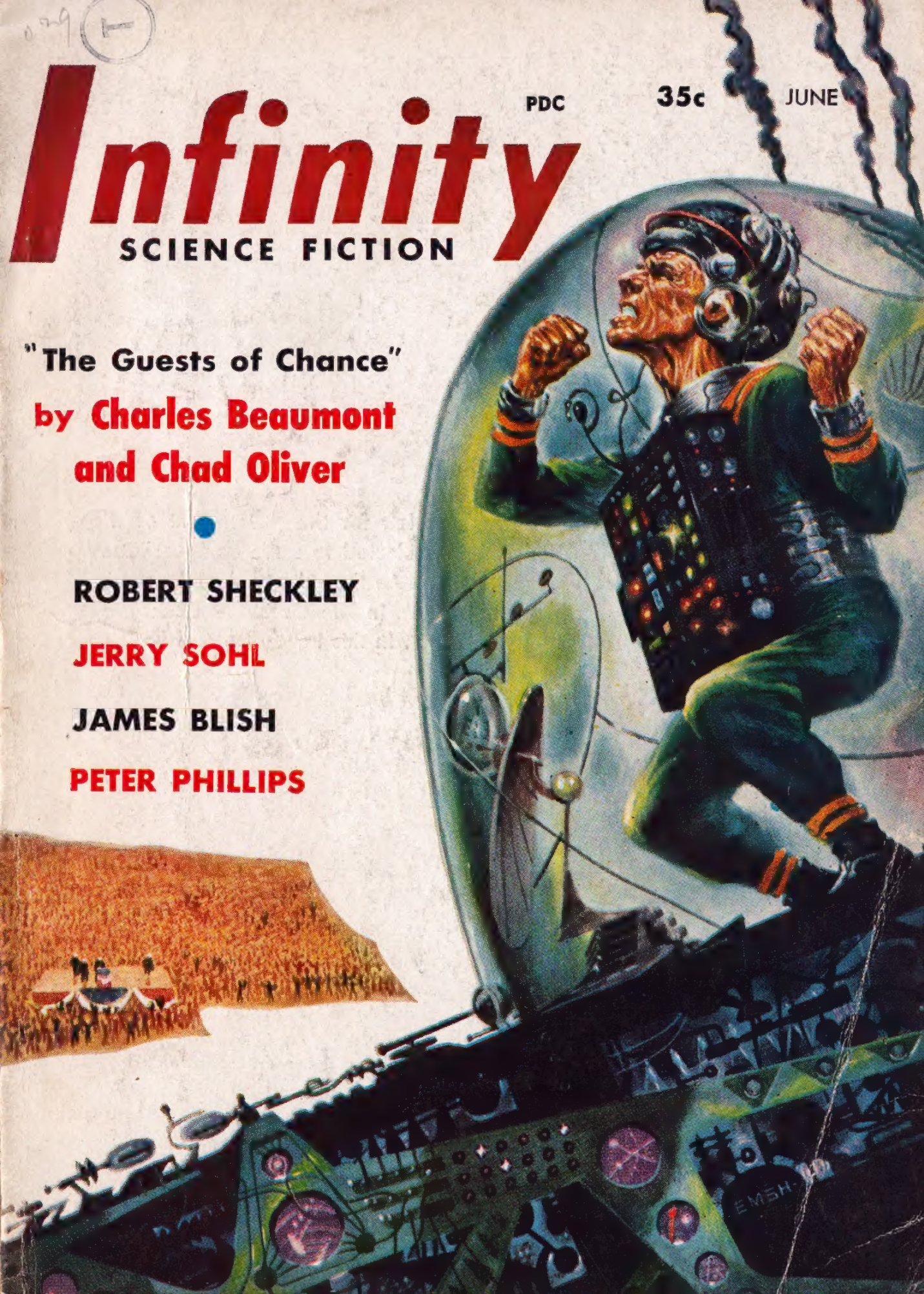
by Charles Beaumont and Chad Oliver

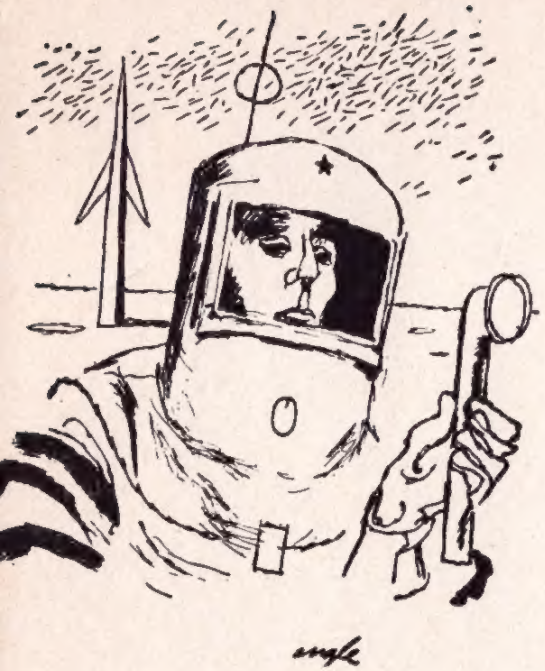
ROBERT SHECKLEY

JERRY SOHL

JAMES BLISH

PETER PHILLIPS





IT CAN HAPPEN HERE!

It *can* happen: When there's nothing left for the government of the United States to do, anybody may be elected to serve as figureheads —even a crazy, mixed-up bunch like the Aesthetic Party. And the results may be as crazy and mixed-up as those in *The Guests of Chance* by Charles Beaumont and Chad Oliver . . . in this issue of **INFINITY!**

It *can* happen: Disease and old age will be licked, and death will become the exception rather than the rule. But that rare death may cause a crisis if it happens to a female member of the crew of an interstellar vessel, as it does in *Death in Transit* by Jerry Sohl . . . in this issue of **INFINITY!**

It *can* happen: Atomic war may be launched by an unsuspected—and unsuspecting—culprit, and the job of stopping it may fall on the shoulders of one man like Dr. Peter Harris of CIG. That's exactly what happens in *Sponge Dive* by James Blish . . . in this issue of **INFINITY!**

It *can* happen: The Martians may turn out to be alien and mysterious, and yet be more like us than we can possibly suspect. Read *Under the Skin* by Leslie Perri . . . in this issue of **INFINITY!**

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SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE, 1956

Vol. 1, No. 3

STORIES

THE GUESTS OF CHANCE
Charles Beaumont and Chad Oliver 4
THE STILLED PATTER.....James E. Gunn 23
UNDER THE SKIN.....Leslie Perri 30
DEATH IN TRANSIT.....Jerry Sohl 60
VARIETY AGENT.....Peter Phillips 77
SPONGE DIVE.....James Blish 83
REBUTTAL.....Betsy Curtis 100
ROUND-UP TIME.....Chester Cohen 110
THE MOB.....Robert Sheckley 120

DEPARTMENTS

INFINITY'S CHOICE.....Damon Knight 98
FANFARE..... 117
BY THE EDITOR..... 126
FEEDBACK.....The Readers 128

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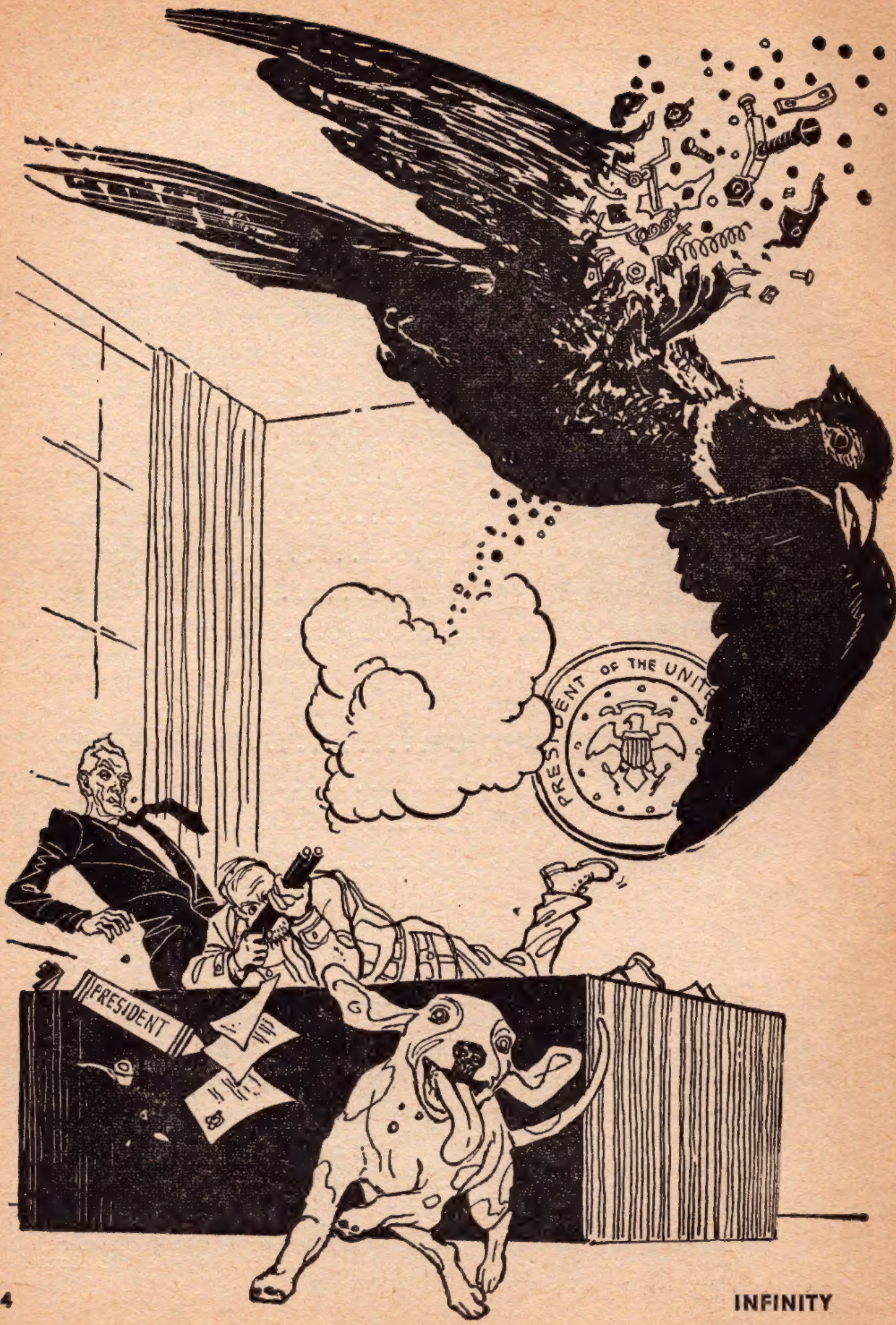
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITE
PRESIDENT

It was time for a change, all right

—but it was the administration, not

the voters, who wanted it!

The Guests of Chance

by CHARLES BEAUMONT
and CHAD OLIVER

Illustrated by EMSH

THE PRESIDENT of the United States belched irritably and set aside his sixteenth whisky sour. "Gentlemen!" he implored of the din, "Gentlemen, *please!*"

The babel swelled.

"All the time," said the President, with great bitter-

ness, "I am sorry I ever agreed to take this job. I might say, *quite* sorry."

"Bilge!" roared the Vice-President. "Who isn't?" He took a swing at the official architect.

"Here, now, both you and T. P. O. forget your squabble, at once." President St. John Tors' voice rose to a squeak. "We must rise above our problems. You're just in a bad mood, Fatherwell."

"That is *distinctly* not true."

"Enough! We have important governmental business at hand. T. P. O., show him the sketch."

The official architect hesitated a moment. His wool tie was loose around the neck of his dirty brown shirt. He picked up a sheet of paper and laid it out on one of the room's large polished tables. Drawn on the paper, in charcoal, was a single connected line.

"There!" shouted the President, weakly; "what d'you think of *that?*"

Aurelius Fatherwell tossed his hair out of his eyes. He snorted and, without advancing, craned his neck for a look.

"It's an egg," he said at last, fighting his fascination.

"Explain it to him, T. P. O."

"Well," said the burly architect, rubbing the palms of his hands along his gritty slacks, "the way I look at it, we're no Hansels and Gretels, like in the story."

The President waited patiently. "Yes. Go on."

T. P. O. seemed disappointed. "What I mean is, we're human beings, not any Hansels and Gretels; so why should we all live in a gingerbread house?"

"Right as rain," agreed St. John Tors. "Excellent simile. But get to the point."

Aurelius Fatherwell crossed his hairy arms and looked elsewhere. "If," he said, "there is one."

"Listen!" stated T. P. O. "Washington has been the same for too long. It has died on the vine." He drew himself up proudly. "It is not *functional.*"

"Garbage," said the Vice-President. He carefully adjusted the scarf around his throat. "I'm against it," he said.

"Why, in heaven's name?"

"Because it looks like an egg, that's why. In such a building I would feel less like a Vice-President than an embryo. I would sit about nervously all day waiting for something to hatch."

St. John Tors muttered in Maya, scowled, ran his fingers

through his beard. "Oh, you're all out of sorts. It's perfect and you know it. Anyway, it's a change. You *can't* deny that it's a change!"

"I deny nothing. Build it—who cares? Certainly not I." Whereupon Aurelius Fatherwell turned on his heel and stalked out of the Presidential chamber, creating a flurry of sawdust.

TORS sighed. "Poor Aurelius," he said, "I fear that he was not meant for this life."

"Who was?" asked the young architect. "We're all sacrificing our work on the altar of government. We're all *wasting* ourselves."

"How sad, T. P. O. And, how true," said Tors. But T. P. O. had walked away. He stood by the French window, trembling slightly.

The President joined the younger man, and placed a fatherly hand upon his shoulder. "T. P. O.," he said, "there's something troubling you."

"Well—"

"Please, I know there is. Tell me."

"Well . . ." T. P. O. choked. "It isn't right."

"What isn't right?"

"The design."

"What? Ridiculous. You're over-modest, my boy. It's perfect. Orders will be issued for work to begin post haste."

The young man suddenly thrust his fist through the glass. "No," he snarled. "It's functionalism in its purest form, okay; but—it's spoiled." He whirled, seized the older, thinner man's arm and dragged him over to the giant world map. "Look," he said, "at that."

"You mean America?"

"Yes. America! It's driving me crazy."

"I don't quite underst—"

The telescreen flickered into fitful life. A pretty girl announced: "President Tors, there is a Mr. Pitts who wants to see you. He's been waiting three weeks."

"Can't be bothered," the President snapped. "Tell him to go away."

"But he says it's very important."

"I'm sure it must be. Get rid of him!"

"Yes, sir."

The screen faded.

"Now then," Tors said. "You were saying that America is driving you crazy."

"Yes," cried T. P. O., stabbing at the map with his finger. "This," he barked, "and this! And this! An honest functional shape in such a surrounding would be like a pearl in a junkheap!"

The President patted his head with a handkerchief. "Patriotism of the flag-waving type," he said, in a low voice, "is not necessarily one of the requisites here; but—"

"I'm talking about it from the aesthetical standpoint," the young man in the scuffed leather jacket declared. "Just look at those ragged edges, will you! Aesthetically they make no sense at all; they have no *use!* Lower California, for example. Doesn't it *murder* your sense of mass and distribution?"

"Well, to tell you the honest to goodness truth, I hadn't ever quite thought about it in exactly that way."

"Florida, all those silly New England states—what do they *mean,* composition-wise?" The young architect sucked at his bleeding knuckles. "And you wonder why no other country will listen to us, when we don't even have balance! We lead the world in technology, but artistically we are jerks."

"T. P. O., what are you suggesting?"

The young man turned and squared his shoulders. "That we make our country look like something!" he said with dignity. "That we round off those ragged edges, bring it into a nice, tight, functional shape."

"I—I still don't follow."

"Blow 'em up!" shouted T. P. O. "Sink 'em! Just get rid of the stupid things!" He panted excitedly. "Oh, I know, it'll take work. Careful planning. Organization. But I'll tell you this: Once the job is done, we'll regain the respect of our neighbors."

St. John Tors studied the drawings for a time, the rolled sketches T. P. O. had pulled from his jacket. After a while he said, carefully: "They look like eggs."

"Oh, God!" The architect snatched up his papers and stood glaring. He turned and ran out of the room, leaving President St. John Tors alone.

IT WAS, somehow, a relief. Tors listened to the slamming of the doors, stood a while and then walked over to his desk and began to draw slowly on the hard rubber mouthpiece of his favorite hookah. He tried to blame his friends for their temperament, but—he could not blame them. For, after all, had he not also become temperamental under the stress of office? Was this life not stultifying, and pointless, and endlessly monotonous? What the devil use was there for a government in this day and age, anyway?

None. None whatever, in any old-fashioned sense. And

though St. John Tors had had plenty of reason for running for President—the very highest possible motives, in fact—at the time, he had to admit now that he had been utterly frustrated in his aims. He could recognize this where T. P. O. couldn't. He was willing to admit, to himself at least, that he was thoroughly sick of it all. But there seemed to be nothing he could do. . . .

The blast of a shotgun exploded the President's revery. He looked up and saw a colossal figure loping toward him.

"A hit!" bawled Secretary of State Laurent, flexing his muscles. "A clean hit!"

"Hullo, Morris."

The huge man stumbled under the impact of the brown and white bird dog which had raced between his legs. "Get him, Chum!" he yelled. "Bring! Bring!"

The dog called Chum snarled viciously, skidded into a corner across the slick floor, and seized between his sharp white teeth a curious pheasant-like object. The pseudo-pheasant contained numerous buckshot holes, from which drooled entrails of steel spring and coil. The English setter trotted over and deposited the thing proudly at the large, booted feet of his master.

"Atta boy, Chum! That's my baby. By God, he fetched him truly, hey, Tors?"

"Yes," said St. John Tors, without enthusiasm. The antics of the Secretary of State were sometimes disconcerting. Still, the man *could* write, if one cared for that sort of thing. Certainly, *The Moon Rises, Too* had won considerable critical acclaim . . . in its day.

Morris Laurent thumped his gorilla's chest and broke into a giant grin. He reloaded the meticulously clean shotgun and struck a pose.

The President said something in Maya and absently doodled a hieroglyphic on a sketch pad.

"Tors, boy! Old buddy. What's eating you?"

The President stroked his beard. "Oh, Morris, I don't know—I'm sick of it all. Sick, sick, sick."

"It's a rough shoot, all right," Laurent agreed. "But buck up."

St. John Tors sighed. "It's no use, Morris. I'm dreadfully frustrated. These governmental problems are nibbling away at my writing time—snatching it from me, bit by bit! I have not completed a poem in over a week, Morris. If *only* we could get out of office somehow—by the way, any luck with Indonesia?"

"None," said the Secretary of State regretfully, sighting along his shotgun toward a porcelain vase.

"You couldn't even stir up a little civil strife? Nothing? Nothing at all?"

"The cowards won't fight. They have not the guts."

Tors groaned and a Mayan expletive split the air. "We're licked, then. Licked! We will be in office forever."

"I tried. Insulted them, fired a shot at their Ambassador."

"God!" Tors moaned. "In the whole vast world is there no single stimulating problem?" The President slapped his thigh dispiritedly. "Nothing to relieve the monotony? Nothing that might get us off this weighty hook and remove us to private life again? Morris, it's symptomatic of our times. It is as I symbolized in *The Glass Cosmos*. Life has lost its point, its purpose, not to say its zing. We're doomed, Morris. Quite doomed."

"Yeah," the Secretary of State said, nodding in agreement.

The President drew slowly on his water pipe and permitted smoke to dribble from his hawklike nose. What was there to say? Their program for giving the running of the government and the life of the people more artistic unity and meaning had swept them into office, but that was all it had done. Tors and his cabinet had not been able to put it into effect—or even agree on what steps should be taken in order to do so. But since the country continued to run so smoothly under its own super-efficient momentum, nobody else was interested in taking over the government; and the voters obviously would keep re-electing the Aesthetic Party candidates from pure habit.

The telescreen g l o w e d again. The same pretty girl said: "Mr. Pitts is still here, President Tors. He says he simply must talk to you."

"Tell him I'm in conference. Tell him anything, but make him go away."

"Yes, sir."

The President turned back to Laurent. "When we ran for office we expected a magnificent fusion of art and the state, a return to fundamentals; instead, this infinite enervating tedium—"

With startling abruptness, a second pheasant-like object whirred noisily into the room, wings flapping frantically. "Ho!" shouted the Secretary of State. He dropped to one knee, squinted, whipped his shotgun into position, and

blasted. One leaden wingtip fell off. The flying creature circled in a confused manner, dipped, righted itself, and buzzed out through a second door.

"Ho!" cried Morris Laurent.

Man and dog pounded out into the hall in hot pursuit of the robot pheasant. "Out of my way!" boomed the Secretary of State. "Out of my way!"

St. John Tors returned to his pipe. From time to time he flinched at the loud report of a shotgun. Then, gradually, the shots faded away to a rumbling like faraway thunder.

"God," said the President. "God."

The videophone buzzed.

"Yes?" he said wearily.

"Pitts again, sir," announced his receptionist, stroking her hair. "He says you *must* talk with him."

"Pitts? I know no Pitts. What does he want, my dear?"

"He *says*," began the receptionist haughtily, "that he has —wait! You, there! Pitts! You can't—"

It was too late.

The door burst open, and a very small man with glittering eyes and stone-white hair came trotting in.

"I," the man said breathlessly, "am Pitts."

"You are Pitts," repeated the President. "Is there more?"

"Yes. I am a scientist."

"How exciting."

"I have the honor to announce to you, sir, that I have made a remarkable discovery of the very greatest interest to the welfare of this nation."

St. John Tors eyed the frantic little man with a mixture of annoyance and acute resignation. He took another long draw on his hookah.

Professor Pitts came very close to the desk and gave a solemn, confidential wink. "I," he stated, "have devised a machine." He drew himself up proudly. "One that will go through space! I call it a *space machine*."

A flicker of interest crossed Tors' pale face. "Go on."

"It will go anywhere."

St. John Tors nodded. "*Anywhere*, you say?" A thought was born. "Pitts, you interest me. Yes. Sit down and tell me about it."

The little man with the bright eyes pulled up a chair and began to talk.

While he talked, the President sucked on the hookah mouthpiece and nodded thoughtfully from time to time.

ST. JOHN TOR'S gray, spatulate fingers wound like snakes about the hammered Incan pendant that hung from his neck, and he muttered unintelligibly as he paced the excitement-charged room.

"It is a pity," he said at last, eyes closed, "a very great pity that I cannot say what I wish so desperately to say. Yet, I cannot: I do not know the words. For there are none. None so nobly drenched in exactitude that they can begin to express this great moment in—"

The Secretary of State sneezed six times so violently that he was obliged to leave the room for several minutes. Upon his return, President Tors was frowning.

"Sorry," said Morris Laurent. Feeling cold eyes, he added, "It's that goddamn Malay fever. Can't seem to shake it."

"That's all right," Tors said with languid iciness. "We *all* have to sneeze, sometimes." He nodded. "Very well: no preamble. Instead, permit me to introduce to you a man whose contribution to our world will be remembered long after we are dust; a man who has ridden in upon this flaccid rotting Earth like Hannibal, loins girt for action where action there has been

none—the man, in a word, of the hour: Professor Milo Pitts."

The little man with hair like white flames flushed becomingly and half-rose to the silent assemblage. He sat down again quickly.

"I have called you here tonight," President Tors continued, "to reveal the most remarkable discovery in the history of science. The scope of it beggars description and sends the imagination reeling. Briefly—for the time has come for work and not for words—Professor Pitts has succeeded in devising a machine which will carry us to the stars!"

Eyebrows sprang up instantaneously. Tors smiled.

"Yes. Actually and literally. If we marshal our energies, I think it not hyperbole to venture that within a fortnight or so we shall be ready to visit the moon. And Mars. And—where else did you say, Professor Pitts?"

"Venus," said Pitts.

"And Venus! Think of it, my friends! At last, an escape. A project. *Work!* Well now, was it worth your whiles to come to this meeting or was it not worth your whiles?"

Aurelius Fatherwell lit a cigar with paint-cracked fingers. "Impossible," he said.

"What's that?"

"Poppycock! Balderdash! Fellow's a fraud."

The President thumped loudly on the desk. "Just a moment," he said. "Order!"

Morris Laurent reached inside his shirt and plucked thoughtfully at an ebon clump of hair. His voice boomed gratingly. "Can't be done."

People began to rise and walk from their chairs.

The little professor jumped to his feet and screeched: "Wait! You're wrong. Completely wrong. I can prove it to you, if you'll just listen to me!"

There was a general grumbling, lacerated by the shrill, pleading voice of Milo Pitts. The cabinet members reluctantly seated themselves.

Milo Pitts closed his eyes. "I know, I know," he said slowly. "I know what you are thinking; and it is not in my heart to blame you. I have been trying for thirty-three years to find someone who would listen to me. This is my life, my work, my dream. Even I was surprised when your great President revealed his enthusiasm and his mighty visionary soul. My friends, now that the moment is actually at hand, I find myself—I find myself—I—"

The high, thin voice crack-

ed, broke and splintered, ending in a series of staccato sobs. The little man recovered himself with difficulty and went on with greater control.

"It has been drummed into all of you that with the abolition of atomic power we bade *adios* to our dream of conquering space. Therefore, you believe it. Good people, it will be my mission to show you a horse of another color."

Professor Pitts lifted from the table a huge paper cylinder which he unrolled. Assisted by Morris Laurent, he fastened it to the wall.

"There!" he said triumphantly.

Every eye glued itself upon the massive blueprint.

"It is rectangular," said T. P. O., at last.

"It is gray," said Aurelius Fatherwell.

"It is covered with gadgets," said Morris Laurent.

"It is a space machine!" said St. John Tors.

THE HUGE, square contraption hung uneasily on the wall. Even in outline, it appeared awkward and forever earthbound. From its gray angularity protruded aerials and amplifiers and great silver mirrors. High atop the rectangle perched what seemed to be a pilot's seat and a large glass helmet from which ran innumerable tubes and wires.

"My dream," said Milo Pitts, simply. "I call it *The Cutlass.*"

Morris Laurent squinted. "How does it go?" he asked.

Milo Pitts smiled. "It does not use atomic power," he said, "because it does not need to. Get what I mean?"

There was a strained silence.

Pitts seemed to have said all he intended to say.

The silence continued.

"Any questions?" asked Professor Pitts, finally.

Aurelius Fatherwell nodded. "Just one, old man."

"Fire away!"

"*What makes it go?*"

"Oh," the little man said; "that."

"Yes."

"That," stated Milo Pitts proudly, "is the beauty of it. My space machine is powered by cosmic mental energy; CME, for short. It draws upon the most prodigious power in the known universe. The atom? Bah! It is nothing. The sun? A mere bonfire! Chemical fuels? Hopelessly outdated! Oh, friends, friends, look into your skulls! *There* is the power which will forever free man of his shackles. My space machine is powered by

the human mind!"

"You mean," asked Morris Laurent, dubiously, "you mean you . . . think at it?"

"Exactly!" cut in St. John Tors. "You have hit it, Morris. That, succinctly, is the marrow of the matter. Professor Pitts, after a veritable lifetime of research and dogged devotion, has devised a machine which *amplifies* the latent creative powers of the human mind. That, in an eggshell, is what makes it go. A fuller explanation, I fear, would involve much tedious technical data. We who have artistic rather than scientific bents should be content to leave bothersome questions of detail to the man who best understands them: Milo Pitts. However, I may say to you at this time that I have given the project a *thorough* scrutiny and am in a position to state without reservation that it is not only feasible, but workable as well. There you have it. We are prepared to start work immediately."

"Let me re-design it!" called T. P. O., pulling at his woolen tie. "It is a monstrosity. Let me re-design it. At least let me do that!"

He started for the blueprint on the wall and was restrained by the burly hands of Morris Laurent.

"One other question," piped the Vice-President. "Just one more little question."

"Well?"

"How much is it going to cost to build this thing?"

"Well . . . to do a good job, to get it *right*—I should estimate — including research, preparation, parts and labor —between eleven and fifteen billions," Tors said, quietly.

Professor Pitts raised a hand and shook his head violently. "Give or take a billion," he shouted.

"But, good Lord! That's—"

"Do we want a slapdash sort of ship, a lick and promise, adhesive and glue?"

"Well, no, of course not. But . . ."

"Then an end to your caviling! Milo: get a good night's rest. Sweet dreams!"

When Professor Pitts had been ushered down the hall to his special guest room, the President closed the doors of his chamber, looked about at his friends, and broke into decidedly raucous laughter.

"I don't care what you say," Aurelius Fatherwell snapped. "*I* consider this a harebrained scheme."

"Of course," answered the President.

The members of the Aesthetic Party stood in confused silence.

"Pulling a fast one, eh, Tors?" asked Morris Laurent, squatting down abruptly on his haunches.

Aurelius Fatherwell smacked his palms together impatiently. "Come, come, St. John! This is not the time for obscurity. This is not the time to be cryptic. This is not the time for analogy and symbolism."

"Yeah," said Morris Laurent. "Speak truly, Tors."

The President smiled. "It is all frightfully simple," he explained. "I take it that we are all agreed that Professor Pitts' plan to create a gravity nullifier through the use of cosmic mental energy is—ah—not feasible."

"It'll never get off the ground," Laurent asserted.

"Quite. You see, good friends, that is exactly the point. If we divert virtually all the funds in the United States Treasury into the Space Machine Project . . ." Tors' voice was low and conspiratorial, full of dark glee. ". . . then, when the contraption fails to perform as advertised—we are washed up! All of us. Washed up! Finished! *Through!*"

A stunned silence settled over the chamber.

"Such dull fellows!" St. John Tors said, impishly. "Am I cursed with a staff of simpletons? Must I draw pictures?"

Aurelius Fatherwell snapped his fingers.

Morris Laurent grunted in surprise.

"Ha!" exclaimed the President. "You have seen the light. Exactly. This fantastic scheme to journey to other worlds will collapse like a pricked soap bubble, and we shall be swept out of office on a floodcrest of popular discontent!"

"Free!" shouted the Vice-President.

"Back to our work, back to The Arts," nodded Tors.

The Secretary of State stood up and flexed his muscles. "I wonder," he mused, "whether the elephant are running in the Congo . . ."

The President smiled at his Cabinet.

His Cabinet smiled happily in return.

ONE FULL year had passed.

It was the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Washington lay like a white casket amidst the colors of spring; the dappled fires of azaleas, the yellow panic of roses, the emerald lawns freckled with the porcelain blossoms of Japanese cherry trees.

President St. John Tors sighed. His black velvet burnoose, the inaugural suit forgotten all these months, rustled crisply in the early morning air. An expression of warmth and silent joy wrenched his face pleasantly.

"So," he said. "After all this time, these many horrible months of despair and uncertainty . . ." He turned to Aurelius Fatherwell. "Give me your arm, good friend. I feel like a man who has spent two years crawling through odious drains and sewers, crawling with hopeless implacability, faithless and yet not without faith, doubting and not doubting, knowing only that I must not stop." He wavered unsteadily. "And now I see the light of freedom, of escape."

"Yeah," said the Secretary of State, exuding a fragrant curl of pipe smoke. "Same here."

"Oh, Morris, Morris!" Tors thwacked the huge man's chest. "On Mercuried feet, to set off in pursuit of the Muse again! The hideous nightmare is over, over. Doesn't this moment dance icily upon your spine and overwhelm you? Doesn't it fill you full of excitement?"

"The whole thing is plenty jake by me," commented the Secretary of State, beaming.

"We ran for office as a kind of lark, a mad thing conceived in the bubbling hours of early morning," Tors sighed. "Little did we dream—ah, but the end approaches!"

"What will you do first?" asked Aurelius Fatherwell.

"After we're canned?" Laurent thought a moment. "Well, I figure to visit Basutoland. Lots of game there. Giant-hearted animals that know how to kill and know how to die. Shoot a couple of big fellows, then hit for the Congo. Like to pay a friendly call on N'bawai, a skinny black who knows how to use his dukes. Box a round or two, fly over to Kenya and visit a Masai who they say plays chess good though I've personally never seen him at bat. Then—"

"I," said Fatherwell, "shall retire to the pine-scented forests of the great northwest, where I shall think about the growing things and paint owls." He grasped Tors' arm. "You don't suppose that there's a chance of the machine actually . . . that is to say, what with all that money we've spent . . . you don't suppose . . ."

St. John Tors guffawed. "Not one chance," he laughed, "in ten billion."

The laughter of the President was infectious. Soon the

gathered Cabinet members were roaring, tears streaming from their eyes.

At length Tors snapped his fingers and waited for silence.

"The time is now," he said melodiously. "Shake off your fardels and let us away to the spaceport!"

With which the heads of government marched through the centuried halls of the White House out into the spring air, thence into waiting copters which bore them swiftly to the designated area.

THE NAKED take-off space seethed and swarmed with people, young and old, sleepy-eyed in the cold morning sun, but loud with anticipation.

There was no space machine in sight.

At the approach of the presidential copter, a hush settled. There were a few scattered cheers, but these soon subsided into respectful silence.

Tors and his cabinet walked quickly, surrounded by a retinue of burly men who brandished traditional, albeit quite unnecessary, revolvers.

"My friends," Tors said, when he had reached the elevated podium. "My good people! Today, as you know, marks the culmination of much work. It is an historic day, bound to stand beside the discovery by Columbus of America, and the completion by Pound of the Pisan Cantos. Today we wriggle free from the death-grip held on us so long by this terrestrial serpent, and venture forth among the heavenly bodies. There has been no greater moment. But first, because we, as a nation, have always been known to smile as we have remoulded Destiny, because we know how closely Art has ever walked with Technology, we are going to pause a short time before getting to the business of the day. Pause and—laugh! Yes: Let us *laugh* in the face of the Fate we now control. Come now, everybody! Ha! Ha ha!"

The President broke into dignified but resounding guffaws, and continued until the sober-faced cluster had joined in. Laughter billowed from the huge circular area, billowed and grew until the air was pulsing wildly with merriment.

No one noticed the genuine smiles of the Commander-in-Chief and his staff. No one noticed the brief handshakes that took place on the dais.

"Friends! *Prepare!*" Tors cried, suddenly. "Gentlemen of the Press, scientists, schol-

ars—prepare! The launching is about to begin!"

Tremulously, the President nudged a tiny red button at his side. There was a drone, a creak, a rumbling. From the cleared area, giant metal plates whirred apart, revealing a gigantic square hole. Then, slowly, imperially, *The Cutlass* lifted into view, like some lordly animal rising from still black waters.

There was an intake of breath from the people.

A tense quiet.

The space machine moved further and further out of the pit until it was considerably larger than the White House. Then its upward motion ceased and it rested, complete.

"Gad," breathed Vice-President Fatherwell. "A damned lucky thing you kept it hidden. It looks like a damned cracker box."

"Yes," agreed Tors, gleefully. "It does, doesn't it!" He rubbed his hands.

"I still can't understand where all the money went, though."

"Lots of radium, for one thing," explained the President. "Walls coated with it. Expensive alloys in the foundation. It adds up."

The big gray machine was as quiet as a deserted house. The only sounds were the *ching* of cameras' levers and the hornets' buzz of recording equipment. Thousands of eyes blinked at the immense rectangular *Cutlass*, with its bedizenry of coils and wires and tubes, its million-springed bottom, its antennae and sunscoops and glass blisters.

The crowd gasped as a second, infinitely smaller set of plates whirred apart in the exact center of the top of the rectangular space machine. The seated figure of Milo Pitts loomed slowly and majestically into view.

He was completely enclosed in a wire-spangled glass casing. A huge glass helmet fitted snugly over his head and a black panel across his chest blinked and flashed with colored lights. He smiled confidently in every direction, then stared toward the President.

"Poor little guy," Morris Laurent murmured. "This'll hit him hard. Hope he is giant-hearted."

"Are we ready?" St. John Tors called into a special microphone.

Milo Pitts took a deep breath, causing a tiny storm of lights and buzzes to emanate from the panel in his chest. He tested the moorings which held him fast to his space machine. He looked at Tors and nodded.

"I am sad," said Aurelius Fatherwell.

Chuckling, struggling to retain a sober expression, St. John Tors winked broadly and cried: *"Per aspera ad astra!* To the stars, then!"

A GRAVEYARD quiet muffled the standing watchers, as Professor Milo Pitts made an 'O' with this thumb and forefinger, gave his helmet a final adjustment, grinned confidently and rose to a standing position inside the bubble.

He remained thus for five minutes, while nothing happened.

"What's he doing?" whispered the Secretary of State.

"Shhh. He's thinking."

"The power of the mind—the machine's fuel, you remember?"

Morris Laurent smiled quizzically. "Oh," he said.

Aurelius Fatherwell fidgeted. "I don't know about you," he commented softly, "but it gives me the creeps."

The minutes limped slowly on, and the crowd shifted restlessly, waiting.

Milo Pitts' face became distorted with concentration. He stood swaying, fists curled into tight knots, body rigid. A pattern of embossed veins covered his forehead like red lace.

The Cutlass lay still as a boulder.

"This," said Morris Laurent, looking the other way, "is murder."

Tors stood motionless, chuckling quietly as before. "Incredible person," he said. "Actually believes he can *think* five hundred tons of solid matter off the ground and into—"

A wild cheering shattered the President's sentence. He glanced back at the platform and said:

"God!"

Milo Pitts had not altered his intense look. Except for rippling jaw muscles and strained neck tendons that seemed about to fly loose, there was no change here.

But there was change of a different sort on the circular platform. For the giant space machine had begun to rock on its springs, creaking loudly. Back and forth, a little faster each time.

Milo Pitts got down on one knee, gnashed his teeth and blinked at the perspiration that ran into his eyes. He trembled in great spasms of concentration.

"What's happening?" Morris Laurent demanded. "What's happening?"

President Tors did not answer. He grasped the railing

of the rostrum and stared, mouth agape.

"Look!"

The groaning of the million springs ceased. The space machine paused, then jerked a full foot off the platform, where it hung, revolving slowly.

Milo Pitts was now panting and sweating, pounding the bottom of the glass cage with his fists, grinding his teeth together so violently that the sound—a series of sickening crunches — came c l e a r l y t h r o u g h the Presidential hook-up.

Then, noiselessly, *The Cutlass* began to rise into the air.

Aurelius Fatherwell clapped a hand to his forehead. "Impossible!" he croaked. "Quick! *Do* something!"

Tors pulled the microphone to his mouth.

"Say something," Fatherwell hissed. "Get his mind off it. It's our only chance."

"What shall I say?"

"*Any*thing—it doesn't matter. Here give it to me!" The Vice-President thought a moment, eyed the lifting mass of metal, and barked: "Pitts, you're a dodo! Your mother is a monkey! Your father is a chuckle-head!"

The Secretary of State wrenched the steel sliver away. "Pitts," he said, "there's a rhino charging you! Run, man, run!"

"What is seventeen times nine?" cried St. John Tors desperately into the microphone.

But Pitts did not respond. He could be seen rolling over and over, his suit stained dark b l a c k with perspiration, mouthing silent thoughts. *The Cutlass* was five feet off the ground, now, bobbling like an ocean liner in stormy waters.

"We must think," Tors said. "Perhaps a conundrum. Pitts—Milo, I say—why does the chicken cross the road? I said, why does the chicken cross—"

"Stop!" bellowed Morris Laurent. He looked skyward. "The damn thing's right over us!"

"Don't let it fall now, for God's sake—we'll be crushed!"

And then, with a final paroxysm, Milo Pitts lay on his back and kicked wildly. "Up!" he screeched, the word pouring from a dozen loudspeakers. "Up! *Up!*"

The great space machine, *Cutlass*, shuddered above the throng, spun once, and shot straight upward—a silver-gray wink.

In a matter of seconds it was gone from sight.

As was Milo Pitts, also.

ST. JOHN TORS sat behind his massive desk and sobbed quietly to himself. His black-clad form trembled almost without control.

"I have failed," he whispered. "I have failed myself and my party."

There could be no doubt of it.

The Aesthetic Party would be re-elected by a landslide, and of course there could be no withdrawing.

Milo Pitts had already circled Mars successfully and was thinking his way back home.

So they would have to run again.

And they could not lose.

A tiny panel in the wall flapped open with disconcerting suddenness. A pheasant-like object streaked into the room, beating its wings and squawking loudly.

The door burst open.

"Ho!" shrieked Morris Laurent, charging into the chamber with shotgun at the ready. "By damn! Back, Chum!"

The bird-dog skidded to a stop clumsily and began to pant, its long red tongue lolling on the floor. Tors ducked frantically as the Secretary of State threw himself across the desk, took quick aim, and loosed both barrels with twin blasts that shook the room.

The pheasant twitched spasmodically, whirred, and darted out the door, trailing cogs and machine oil.

"After him, chum!" bellowed Laurent. "Tear him to pieces!"

The dog and the man galloped out, baying in hot pursuit of their quarry.

The President of the United States pulled himself up from behind his desk and straightened his rumpled beard with thin, shaking fingers.

He buried his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

He tried, very hard, not to think of the future.

The visiscreen flickered.

"Yes?" said the President.

The pretty girl said, "There's a man to see you, sir. His name is Ricketts. He says he has a method of conquering time that is absolutely foolproof. He calls it a time machine."

"A time machine?" St. John Tors paused. A flicker of hope shone faintly in his eyes. "Show Mr. Ricketts in," he said. "After all, we have nothing to fear but fear itself . . ."

∞ ∞ ∞

The age-old battle of the sexes may yet be the deadliest of all!

by JAMES E. GUNN

The Stilled Patter

Illustrated by STALLMAN

GEORGE WASHINGTON was the father of his country.

I am not George Washington. My name is Andrew Jones, and it is because of me there will be no more Joneses in the world. There will be, in

fact, no more anybody.

This is the end of the world.

It did not come through fire or ice, with a bang or a whimper, from solar catastrophe or man's suicidal mis-use of atomic power or any of the other fearful possibilities with which the Sunday-supplement writers once terrified us. It came through the exposure of an age-old conspiracy.

I did it. My excuse is the eternal excuse of the scientist: I sought the truth. How it was used was not my concern.

But that it should have led to the depopulation of the Earth concerns me, as it must concern every man, and I have an unshakable feeling of guilt.

Perhaps I write this now in the hope that I may somehow purge myself. I know that it will never be read.

The linen wick gutters in the saucer of melted tallow. It casts strange shadows on the cellar wall. Sometimes I think that they are the ghosts of children come to haunt me, the ghosts of all the little children who will never be born.

But this is not what I sat down to write while I waited for Lindsay to return. What is keeping Lindsay? He should be back by now.

I will begin again.

My name is Andrew Jones, and today, by my figures, is October 3, 1969. The weather is turning cold here, and soon we must go looking for another hiding place. My joints are getting old; the damp has seeped into them. I long for the year-long warmth of California or Florida, but those areas are still crowded and deadly.

Someone would recognize me.

I think we will try a powerhouse again this winter. Often they have supplies of coal large enough to last us through the cold weather without extra foraging.

CATACLYSM began in 1954, June 13 to be exact. That was the day my second child was born, a boy we named Kevin.

It is surprising that a man who was the father of two children should accuse himself of depopulating the Earth. And yet it is because I was the father of two children that it happened.

Pre-natal care of mothers and post-natal care of infants were subjects of compelling interest in those days, arriving monthly in the burgeoning women's magazines and annually in the proliferous

child-care manuals. Pediatricians and mothers besieged parents with advice, and we consumed everything with catholic appetite: logical, illogical, sensible, insensible, nonsensical, self-contradictory . . .

They kept us on our toes, strung as taut as Stradivarius violins, afraid to act for fear we would do the wrong thing, afraid not to act for fear inaction would be disastrous. Pediatricians and mothers, always the same authors. Never were there any articles on the care of mother and child by a father, only by what I came to think of as the vested interests.

I was slow, I admit; but what father has not been slow? Who, if he had not been slow, would be a father?

The books and the articles would have been troublesome enough if the information they imparted had been accurate. But slowly I became aware that they were subtly interwoven with mis-statements.

I raveled them out, I categorized them. I counted five different kinds before I convinced myself.

A mother published this: "One baby takes up all your time—two can't take any more."

The fallacy was obvious. A certain amount of housework was inescapable. If the mother was unable to do the work, what happened to it?

Answer: somebody else did it.

Who? Even in the abundance of those days, most of us couldn't afford nurses, maids, cooks, laundresses, or cleaning women. The era of the poor relation who came to help out for a few months was long past.

Who did the work, then? The father, that's who.

I stared deep into the shocking chasm between the mental processes of men and women.

I studied the statement again. There was no misstatement at all—if you granted the hidden premise and didn't boggle on the implication. It was perfectly valid.

The hidden premise was that women did all the housework. But that hadn't been true for a generation. The husband-father had been drafted into home service, and there was no discharge for him short of death or total disability.

The latter was hard to prove.

But the implication was the deadly thing: in the consider-

ation of a second child, a father's time and labor counted for nothing.

I remembered a shaggy little story about a farmer who held up his hog to let it eat the corn off the stalk. "Doesn't it take a long time to fatten up a hog that way?" exclaimed the efficiency expert.

"Shore," said the farmer, "but what's time to a hog?"

And what, in a woman's eyes, was time to a father?

The second type of misstatement was a pure omission. The thing the baby books didn't mention was that most women felt ten times worse during their second pregnancies.* At this time life became almost unbearable for them—and it was, as a consequence, completely unbearable for their husbands.

Not one baby book or article mentioned that fact. That it was a fact I proved by a personal survey. Every mother questioned revealed that she felt horrible during her second pregnancy. She was surprised that my wife and I didn't know this.

I was not surprised. Nobody ever mentioned it, that is why we didn't know. I think it was at this time I first asked myself: *Is there a subconscious conspiracy to keep this kind of information from leaking out?*

It wasn't important that women didn't know this. They had selective memories (proof of this was that mankind lasted as long as it did). If they were maternally inclined (as most of them were at one time or another), the disadvantages of pregnancy faded into a sort of merciful blur.

If there was a conspiracy, it was aimed at fathers. It was intended to lull them into the logical supposition that conditions usually improve and that experience is the great teacher. Pure delusion! With women, things are always worse, and they are born with all the knowledge they will ever need.

BABIES could be divided into two kinds: "most" and "occasional." Consider, for instance, the following quotation: "Most babies in the early months sleep from feeding to feeding; an occasional baby won't fall into this pattern but insists on being sociable after his meals."

The first time I read that I supposed that this business of "most" and "occasional" was a statistical matter. That

*Editor's note: This may help explain the size of the average American family: 1.6 children.—W. M.

was my fatal mistake. If there was any statistical backing for that statement, I never found it.

In my experience, the chances were nine out of ten that—try as you would—you would have an "occasional" baby.

We did. We had two of them.

The fourth type of mis-statement was the false generalization. It was said, much too often: "A full baby is a sleepy baby."

That is a re-statement of the quotation above.

I sat down with a pencil and paper and figured it out. A small infant took half an hour to finish a bottle. If he ate five times a day, he would have spent 21½ hours asleep out of every 24.

A little farther on I would read something like: "If a baby wakes up early, he is not getting enough to eat." I drew up a schedule:

Baby wakes up (being hungry).
Baby gets fed (all he can hold).
Baby is sleepy (being fed).
Baby goes to sleep (being sleepy).
Baby sleeps until next feeding (being full).

I didn't recognize the baby. Who could? He wasn't my child or anybody else's. He was the pediatrician's pipe-dream child.

I looked at it another way: if the baby slept except when being fed, when did it get the baths, orange juice, vitamins, cereal, and everything else the pediatricians prescribed?

Hoist by their own petards!

The fifth type of mis-statement was the impossible ideal. I tried this one for logic: "Babies should not be allowed to cry before feeding."*

Had those doctors ever tried to keep a hungry child from crying?

Hungry children cried. It was their nature. Some of them—my kind for instance—cried very hard. And children—even pipe-dream children—woke up hungry.

Warming a bottle to drinkable temperature took time, at least five minutes and sometimes ten. Meanwhile, in spite of everything that anyone could do, the baby was crying. He would not be cajoled, walked, teased, patted, jollied, scolded, or argued into accepting any substitute for his formula. With him, it was food or nothing.

For horror, I had a favorite scene: the mother alone, rush-

*Editor's note: This led to swallowing air which made gas bubbles; gas bubbles caused colic.—W. M.

ing from baby to bottle, from bottle to baby, one screaming, the other cold, frantic with the pediatrician's admonitions, and then both too hot . . .

I would not have had it on my conscience for all the royalties in America! At least I have saved the world that.

THERE were more misstatements, but those were enough. I did what any man, any scientist, would have done. I gave my findings to the world. They were published under the title: "What the Baby Books Won't Tell You." The article stirred up immediate controversy.

It is not enough to uncover a conspiracy; you must find a motive. I had discovered the motive behind the Great Conspiracy.

Baby books were not written to teach parents how to care for their children; baby books were written to sell baby books. And magazines published articles about babies to sell magazines to mothers.

Valid reasons. If they had not existed, there would have been no baby books, no women's magazines. But this had far-reaching consequences: the market for baby books and women's magazines was the great, proliferating population of new parents. If the awful truth about parenthood were published, if these hardy, ingenuous souls were discouraged, something quite startling would happen to the market: it would disappear.

There were attempts at suppression on all levels, but the truth was out and nothing could stop its spread. Secret printing presses turned out reprints by the millions; they were passed from hand to hand. Fathers whispered the word to husbands; husbands passed it on to bachelor friends.

The word raced around the world.

It would not have been so disastrous if Lindsay McPherson had not simultaneously perfected his contraceptive pill out of a Southwestern plant named *Lithospermum ruderale*. For the first time, a contraceptive was safe, cheap, and convenient—and 100% effective in reducing *male* fertility.

Birth control was in the hands of the men.

Billions of the tiny pills were turned out. Enemy nations sowed them over each other's territory in boxes containing translations of my article. Men cached them away, carried them in money

belts, hollowed out hiding places in the heels of shoes . . .

Births dropped suddenly. Almost overnight, the maternity wards were depopulated. Hospitals went broke, or began advertising for patrons, sick or well.

The makers of baby foods, baby apparel, and baby accessories went next, then the women's magazines when they lost their advertising. In a few years, the condition hit the schools; one by one they closed their doors.

It was a creeping paralysis. The toy makers and sellers collapsed. The clothing industry couldn't survive longer. The shoe-makers were hardest hit. Food consumption dropped. All over the country, farmers went broke . . .

By comparison, the Great Depression seemed like a boom.

By 1965 the end was in sight. Society disintegrated. The cities were deserted; they burned for years. From a mechanical-agricultural civilization, the world returned to the stone age in one decade.

People went in packs for protection. There were two kinds of them: packs of men hunting for food and packs of women hunting for men.

Soon, as the women grow too old for child-bearing, the race of Man will be doomed.

I did it. I am guilty. Lindsay helped, but I am the one. But how was I to know that society—that human life itself—was founded on a basic deception?

I wonder what is keeping Lindsay. He should be back by now . . .

Editor's note: This manuscript was found in a cellar of a house in a Midwestern city; it is presented here partly for its historical interest, but chiefly for your amusement.

Mr. Wilma Masters (the former Andrew Jones) was found in the same cellar. Our hunting party had taken Lindsay McPherson some time before, and he had directed us promptly to the cellar. Men are like that.

As is the custom, the men were stripped, carefully searched, and sent to the premarital barracks to wait for some girl's proposal. Our readers will be happy to learn that they are both back in service.

Never underestimate the power of a woman.

—Wilma Masters

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UNDER THE SKIN

The road to Ul was paved with danger, difficulty, and good intentions — and it's an open question which of the three was most disastrous!

by LESLIE PERRI

Illustrated by ENGLE

I RAN a story the other day about the arrival on Earth of a Martian diplomat and his wife. And I okayed a picture of the lady presiding over a tea at the Martian embassy. I looked at the picture for quite a while. The lady in her costume, fresh from the Couture Syndicate in Rio, was a carbon copy of every other woman. What was different about her was no longer very different. It was sad, and it was frightening, too.

It took me back to the days when Deborah and I were pioneering in the gloomy bureau Universal News had set up in Marsport. I remember

the biggest story we ever covered; it was the only one we never wrote. And I've been waiting for a time when I could break it because sooner or later you can take the lid off anything. It illustrates a point I try to make when I can.

In the early days we were frequently involved in Martian difficulties. It was partly through genuine concern for their welfare; we liked the Martians without question. But it was also, curiously, motivated by an almost adolescent eagerness to demonstrate efficiency and speed and worth to a people who remained friendly and grateful but aloof and paternally amused by our energies.

This story started as suddenly and simply as most disasters usually strike on Mars, or anywhere. A news flash was relayed in from an interior hill community, Faleeng, to our Marsport office. The news flash to Universal News came almost simultaneously with the official SOS.

Disaster had struck a small community of Martians in the Ul Mountains—a mining region, remote and inaccessible to the Martian land machines. Power failure threatened the colony of 2,000 with extinction. Intense cold was slowly, inexorably moving in from the cheerless sandstone hills from which Ul had been carved.

It was top news as it stood, but there was an additional detail that made it a real 72-point type headline, a screamer. Ul was the seat of Martian diranium mining operations. And Mars ran on diranium ore and whatever it was that the Martians did with it.

We didn't know anything about diranium then and the Martians kept it that way. We had nothing like it and it drew the con boys like a magnet. But fruitlessly. Ambassador Ferne, a real level guy with the Martians, made sure nothing like diranium ever left in anyone's carpet bag. Our relations with the Martians were smooth, as a result. There was really nothing else we wanted from them.

Except maybe to see what their women looked like, and, oh yes, their children. No ancient system of purdah was ever stricter. They were inflexible on the subject. They had not only instituted elaborate precautions for keeping their women invisible, it was, also, distinctly a breach of good manners to mention them. We had been given a rough idea of the methods the Martians employed in rearing

children, but while it excited a lot of psychologist chaps with its novelty, we were still frustrated and speculative about their female relations. Who must have been a pretty attractive and exotic lot, to judge by their men.

But you couldn't, if you were decent, do anything but defer to the Martians in the matter. They were wonderful people, honest, friendly and with no ax to grind. They invariably brought out your best without any seeming effort. They made you examine into your motives, and the darker nooks and crannies of your far-from-perfect-soul.

Consequently, the Ul disaster packed a real wallop for us.

WHEN the Martian authorities got the news from Ul they appealed to Ferne for assistance. The U.F.S. Rocket Auxiliary was the fastest transportation available on Mars, faster than anything the Martians had. The Ambassador ordered the rocket fleet to assist in the immediate evacuation of stricken Ulans to Marsport medical stations.

In addition a team of Martian and Earth Federation technicians boarded the lead ship, *Electra.* Equipment, food and medical supplies were crowded into the remaining ships. And a large fleet of Martian land machines went into action. The land machines were like enormous onyx bowling balls, rolling heavily but smoothly on bands of gripper treads. They would go as far as they could into the hills, and the clumsy, short-hop Martian *wings* would make the rest of the trip to Ul.

Of course the monster maw of public interest on Earth devoured the first news like a cocktail sandwich and clamored hungrily for more. In those days news from Mars took priority. The New York bureau of Universal News was explicit about wanting full coverage—and pictures.

And this was where Deborah Wayne first came into the picture—unfortunately. Deborah was a nice girl, a bright girl, and brilliant with her super-speed, super-sensitive cameras. But I think, now, that the psychologist who screened her for that career was drunk. She was supposed to be ready to cope with the rigors and exigencies of the frontier. But in the showdown she turned out to be a sentimental slob who all but got us kicked off Mars.

I didn't think about Debby

when the news first broke. I might never have thought of her myself, but the New York bureau did. When their orders came in on the Spacetron, the message link between Earth and Marsport, I was alone in our office with Charley Ray of Galactic News. I read him the tape as it came off the machine.

QUOTE PROSTEVELASKER EXWILSON COLON UNPICKLE SELF AND SUBQUOTE TALENT UNSUBQUOTE FOR FULLEST DISASTER COVERAGE WITH PICTURES PERIOD OFFER WAYNE BONUS IF DANGEROUS PERIOD REQUIRE LEAD FOR BLUELINE CASTS AND FULLEST UL BACKGROUNDING END UNQUOTE

"And where do you suppose Debby is?" Charley said. "To think I could have forgotten her!"

"Debby!" I said. "Pictures!" I was thinking that the insatiable human glut for horror and tragedy was a pretty sad and unchanging constant in our Earth civilization.

"They want a real production," I said bitterly. "With a gallon count on the blood running in the streets."

"And you get paid for counting it accurately," Charley said. "We got an hour. Feel noble when we're comfortable. And on our way. With Debby. I won't go without her. Mad about the girl."

"Mad," I agreed. "You'd better call our office and then check with Ferne's office on which crate we get to ride in. While I try to locate that two-legged witch."

Kibby came in. He was relief man and almost always shrouded in an alcoholic fog from which the cleanest, clearest prose emerged. He nodded at us, noticed we were looking less bored than usual and picked up the tape for the answer. He groaned. "You mean I have to *work* this morning? With this head? Background on Ul! The rockpile of Mars."

"Yop," I told him. "SOS came in a couple of hours ago to the communications center. Galactic and Universal got the flash from the stringer in Faleeng, the nearest point to Ul. Sounds real rough out there. And interesting. This is the closest we've ever come to their diranium. But first I have to find Debby."

As I talked, I was looking over a list of stations.

"Ruin my day, altogether," Kibby muttered.

"Try the *Celestial.* She said she was doing a film on those historic ruins outside of Marsport. The *Celestial's* the only dump you can stay in out there."

I rang up the *Celestial.* She had left hours ago.

"Great," I groaned. "She could be anywhere."

Charley put a cigarette in his mouth. And in between the calls I made to different places on the list he told me the seats reserved for the press, us, were on the *Starfish.* We were going along with some crates of blankets and two mine experts, Sam Vechi and his assistant, Raeburn.

"But no pictures of the mines," Charley said. "Or the mining equipment. This order is backed up with RA zap guns. Dipple, over there, was very emphatic. If he didn't know much about anything else, he knew that. I'm surprised he managed to figure out how we were going to get to Ul."

Kibby was at the water cooler, his head pressed lovingly against the cold metal cylinders. "Why are they letting Vechi go along? He's no humanitarian. His interest on Mars is diranium and they're giving him a chance to run through it barefoot."

"Pure conjecture," I said, cautiously but not convincingly. I had given up trying to locate Deborah. "It's a mine area and Vechi is an engineer. With all that education he should be some help."

Vechi was a hard guy to figure and pretty much on his own for a member of the small Earth Federation colony. He was more or less attached to the United Federated States Geological Research Expedition. But he was a free-lancer, too, and disappeared from Marsport for months at a time. It gave rise to rumors about his being an agent on the side for some big mine development syndicate on Earth. His comings and goings were mysterious but you couldn't pin a thing on him. Vechi was slippery, smooth and indefinably unpleasant. But smart.

I HAD just suggested we haul our equipment out of the locker when the door slid open. Deborah, her red hair half over her eyes as usual, came in—a blazing little fireball of energy. She was going full blast. I shrank within myself and wanted to crawl under a desk. If Charley thought this was enchanting and feminine, he could have it.

Although — she had the

throatiest, most electrifying voice I had ever heard. It was a muted female foghorn with a lovely liquid cold. It turned my spine to wax even though I got angry the minute she opened her mouth and used it to say, witheringly, "What's the matter? How many people have to die before you big shots get interested? You two wouldn't dream of offering to help even if you aren't going after the story!"

"I've been trying to get hold of you," I said coldly.

She just looked her contempt. "I've been at rescue headquarters since 6:00 a.m. You might have tried there. Two thousand people face death, you know."

"And little Deborah has trundled out her armor and is in there pitching like mad," I said.

"You hardboiled newsmen," she said, and she was really upset. "You louses."

"Lice," I said. She had made me feel like a louse. I didn't want it to show, so I got sly and mean. "Don't you think this trip is too dangerous for you?"

She had calmed down. She didn't look like Joan of Arc, any more, just tired and troubled. "No," she said briefly.

"O.K.," I said cheerfully. I was only a little bit sorry to be so mean. "Then there's no bonus involved."

She buttoned a button on her sleek green workalls. "Louse, in the singular. Keep your lousy bonus."

Charley gave me a long, disgusted look and left to get his gear.

FROM the air all of Marsport seemed enclosed in a shimmering transparent syntho-glass bag. And it was, as were all the other Martian cities, enclosed in some virtually indestructable sheeting that rose to heights of 20,000 feet—contracting and expanding in the extreme temperature changes of the planet. These breathing, nearly invisible *skins* sheltered the cities, and within them strange hybrid species of flora and fauna flourished. The Martians had evolved a way of life that was tranquil, visually beautiful and civilized—if artificial, by our standards.

Its very artificiality became, in fact, a new kind of reality. The reality of a dream that persists, or a fantasy which retains its unbelievable qualities but becomes actuality. And in this atmosphere we set up our machines and agencies and extensions of Earth — bursting with the conceits and importance of

having conquered space. And, oddly, we did not consider it strange that the Martians displayed no interest in returning our visit.

The spaceport lay outside Marsport, however. When we ventured beyond the protection of the city shelter we wore the pixie-like oxygen hoods and adjusted the thermal dials on our workalls. I never got over being surprised that our technicians on Earth could have been so clever at keeping us comfortable. You got used to nearly everything, as a matter of fact, except the psychological sense that freedom existed within the city shelter—and not in the great outdoors. You could get agoraphobia on Mars; it was rough outside.

When we arrived at the spaceport it seemed as though every citizen in the capital city had turned out. The slender Martian men in their colorful, oddly skirted costumes formed the bulk of the crowd. They had need of extra oxygen, too, and the tall, transparent cones within which they breathed glittered like a thousand needles in the early morning air. Martian women were missing from the crowd, as usual, and as usual you had a strangely wistful feeling about these withdrawn people — who were always friendly but never intimate. Who would not trust you any more than you would mischievous children with the treasures of their ancient and beautiful civilization.

We rode past the crowds in our vehicle, with an R.A. sergeant directing us to the *Starfish.*

It can be said for the Rocket Auxiliary that they worked like beavers loading the U.F.S. Rocket Fleet. The array of ships was impressive. The sleek, silver hulls mirrored the pastel, candy colors of a clear Martian morning. They lay quiescent like glittering feathers on the broad, red-earth field. Far in the distance, low, brown hills rolled out to meet the horizon. Small yellow clouds swirled over a section of the hills—a dust storm into which we would be heading presently.

Our sergeant hopped off the vehicle when we reached the *Starfish.* She was a real old dowager, the *Starfish,* with the broadest beam in the fleet: even slower, but more uncomfortable, than a ride on a three-legged Martian *ileh,* the only beast of burden on the planet.

When we had piled out of the vehicle the first thing I noticed was Deborah's gear,

all neat and ready to be stowed. Then Sam Vechi, sitting on a fibreboard crate with his legs crossed at precise right angles. His face in the transparent visor was thin, darkly tanned and healthier looking than any of ours. And his workalls fitted as though they had had him in mind when they tailored the original design. When he got up at our approach I was surprised again by his height. You remembered him, somehow, as being a small man, which he wasn't.

The audio cup in my oxygen helmet buzzed a little when he began to talk, so I adjusted it and picked up the tail end of what he was saying: ". . . terrible, this Ul thing, isn't it?" I nodded.

Deborah kept fiddling with her audio adjuster, as though she couldn't hear, so she wouldn't have to acknowledge Vechi's greeting. She wasn't good with people she didn't like and she didn't like Vechi.

Charley, who had a bright word for any slob, offered an apology for our offhandedness. "They have a hate on," he lied blithely. "They turned off audio so they couldn't hear my arguments for a reconciliation."

Deborah, who wouldn't let even a phony opportunity go by, said nastily, "I wouldn't give him two minutes or two words more than my contract calls for."

"And it's a good thing it isn't up for renewal," I said.

Vechi smiled and there was something agreeable about all those white teeth in that brown face.

I guess it made Deborah uncomfortable to have Vechi agreeable. "Excuse me," she said. "I want some shots of the mob scene." She looked at me. "Are you going to wave in a story to Kibby before takeoff? Lots of color around."

It was a damnfool question. "I do news. You do pictures." I said it patiently.

"I was only thinking of correlating the two, you crab!" she snapped and stamped away.

"Real friendly type," Charley growled at me. "Quit riding her. She knows her job and she does it."

"She knows her job but not her place," I growled back. "She has to run every show."

"Boy, I bet your ancestors beat the spit out of their women when they went out after the vote."

"That was the turning point in history," I said. "We have been paying for it ever since."

Charley grinned. "It ain't such a big price, considering."

He looked around the field. "Well, I'll wave in my story on the takeoff stuff. There's nothing else for the noon leads."

I WATCHED him leave. And then I looked for Debby—and watched her. From a distance she looked mighty nice, it was true. She had a funny way of moving, a little awkwardly like a young animal, but it had its appeal. And so did her red hair, which was short and curly and never in place. She was young all over except for her figure which was as grown up as it had to be. What no one could understand, though, was why the best looking gal in Marsport hadn't been trapped by any one guy as yet. And how anyone that good looking could also be good. So far from home it didn't usually work out that way. The girls did as they pleased and no one blamed them. It was one of the rewards for being a sucker and doing a stint on Mars.

It gradually dawned on me, as I watched her, that she wasn't doing much active picture-taking. Her usual intensity was curiously missing. She seemed to be thinking about something else as she aimed her camera, up there on top of the *Starfish*. I made a mental note of this. I had learned that when Deborah appeared abstracted there was usually a damned interesting reason for it.

I fished out my communication gimmick and flicked a button. I got the control tower, or, more accurately, underground shelter, and the latest poop. Then I signalled Kibby and dictated a story to him. While I was talking privately into the 'com, Vechi watched me in a disinterested way. Raeburn, his assistant, arrived and they wandered off among the fibreboard crates for a private conversation.

"Paragraph, Kibby," I said into the mouthpiece. " 'The vast rocket terminal at Marsport is soberly alive this morning with preparations for the giant rescue job awaiting the joint forces of the U.F.S. Rocket Auxiliary, and the Martian disaster crew . . .' "

Pundra Doh, the Martian premier, was in the lead ship, *Electra*. But there wasn't time for an interview. Thin, electric-blue spits of exhaust flickered all over the spaceport by the time I had finished dictating. The high, keening sound of the rockets revving

up tore through my helmet and I shouted at Deborah who was still up there, on top of the *Starfish*. My voice in her helmet must have blasted her eardrums.

"Damn you, Steve," she screamed back at me. Then she clicked another wide-angle shot of the field, sat down suddenly and slid down the polished tail of the *Starfish* on her fanny.

It's a wonder her camera survived the descent.

THE STARFISH shuddered as she lurched along, keeping up with the rest of the fleet. Her vibration was too heavy to be soporific but Deborah slept like a baby on a pile of things she had scratched together. Or at least she seemed to be asleep. Maybe because I was looking at her she figured it was a good idea to pretend. There was something wrong with her, something I couldn't put my finger on.

Charley took out a cigarette. He looked at me looking at her. "Why resist?" he grinned.

"You've got a one-track mind," I said. "What I'm wondering is what that little witch has up her sleeve. She's behaving like she's done something—it makes me uneasy."

Charley looked real angry. He flicked an ash meticulously. "You haven't got a damned thing to gripe about, have you? So, instead of relaxing, you're *imagining* enormities she could have committed! What a jerk. Why don't you admit it to yourself; she attracts you. Like she does everyone else. Say something nice about her for a change—you don't impress me."

"She takes good pictures."

Charley laughed, derisively. "I guess you'd like it better if she went space-crazy, like every other dame does here. She ought to drink more, beef more, hell around. Maybe you could stand having her around if you knew she took the guys home with her who would run at the chance.

"You're just waiting for her to make a slip. So, you can write her off. But she won't. You might as well save time and admit what everybody figured a long time ago."

"You through?" I asked.

"Sure."

"I'd still like to know what she's been up to."

I bent forward and started checking my gear. I was so mad my hands shook. I took out a bottle of hooch and examined it while I calmed down; it was vintage stuff, not home brew. I put it away again. I didn't need a drink,

really. Deborah! If it wasn't love it was something just as insidious. I could get real boiled up because of her.

Love, now there was a fancy word! I toyed with it for a minute and considered it in relation to Deborah. And all I came up with was a mental picture of her mouth—very soft, with the ingenuous, upward curve of an eager kid. It didn't solve a damned thing. I closed my gear pack and looked at the other passengers.

Vechi and his boy, Raeburn, were checking gear, too. They spent a little time admiring some scientific gadget Raeburn had fished out for Vechi's approval. Vechi pushed a pointer on a small black dial and sighted us through it; very cool. When they got through playing, they leaned back comfortable-like and looked at us.

Since we were newsmen the conversation was bound to be a little formal.

Vechi must have known he had a doubtful reputation. I guess he figured we were curious about his berth on the *Starfish*; how come he was riding with the press?

Raeburn was a pudgy, balding civil service sycophant. He had little quick brown eyes, a loose wide mouth filled with an unpleasantly self-conscious smile—and practically no chin to balance the naked shine of his brow. He made bad jokes and thought he was quite the boy.

Since I was never at the head of the class for tact I started the ball rolling down the center alley. "What's your interest in this trip, Vechi?" I said.

I heard Charley sigh resignedly.

"I'm a civil engineer," Vechi said. "It seems they need technical people as well as reporters. Technical people to save as much as they can and newsmen to dramatize what hasn't been saved."

Score one, and not for us! I grinned at him. "Got any ideas for the press on what caused the power failure?"

Vechi smiled a gentle, patronizing smile. "Apparently, the Martians use diranium as a source of atomic power. But since no one knows the characteristics of diranium it would be difficult to imagine the type of power installation they employ. It seems evident to me, also, that we will know as little about diranium, later, as we do now—with the strong security measures taken to safeguard the secrets of diranium.

"Furthermore, the Marti-

ans have evolved totally different scientific systems based on materials, limitations and planetary conditions which are alien to us. Entirely different engineering skills are required."

"Then what earthly good are our boys going to be?" I asked.

Vechi stretched his legs. Raeburn listened and said nothing. "We have no way of knowing that Ul station did not sustain a physical catastrophe—in which case a knowledge of construction, how to salvage tunnels, buildings, bridges, heating systems and the like will probably prove useful. We know something of their building techniques from Marsport."

"Well, you certainly appear to be well qualified," I said as courteously as possible. But somewhere a dim instinct warned that this was eyewash. Why wasn't this joker with the other engineering boys up front?

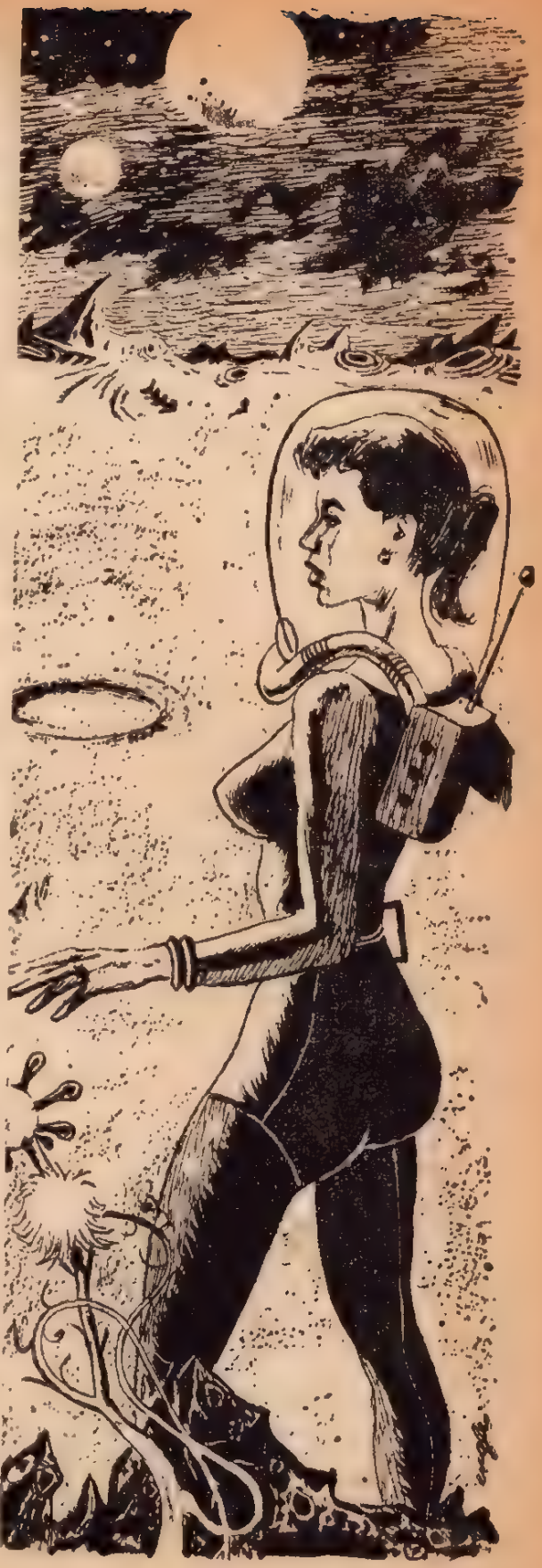
"Thank you, Mr. Lasker," he said, equally courteous. End of interview.

I looked at Charley. He looked at me. Then he handed me his bottle. Trust Charley. "Have a slug, pal," he said cheerfully. "Stop working."

"I will, pal," I said. "Thanks."

It felt good going down and for the first time I realized I had a hangover, from the night before. And the night before that. And then I saw that Deborah's green eyes were wide open and fixed on me.

I took another slug, over and above Charley's little pained exclamation. I didn't like the look in those green eyes.



"HEY, Steve," Debby called in that indecent voice of hers. "I want to talk to you."

"You see, my friend," I said to the owner of the bottle, "she wants to talk to me."

"That makes you lucky," Charley said. He was very carefully putting the top back on the bottle.

"So, talk," I said to her.

"No, *you* come over here for a change."

Then I knew something was wrong. In some crazy way Deborah and I operated on the same frequency. I could always sense things about her —and, I knew, she could about me, too. I grunted. I moved reluctantly. But I went over to her and sat down.

Her face was propped up by an elbow and about six inches from mine after she had drawn my head down for a real private tete-a-tete.

"Steve, I've got to talk to you."

She was real, damned pretty that close up. But that wasn't the reason I got the breathless feeling in my stomach. I wondered how much this was going to cost Universal. I was thinking in terms of money at that point.

"All right," I said. "I couldn't hit you even if I wanted to. What did you do this time?"

"Well. It's not awfully bad and it's not awfully good. It's a delicate situation. And I need your help."

My alarm grew. "Deborah!" I said warningly.

She drew a deep breath through a small, round red mouth. "I smuggled someone on board," she said very quietly.

Well, that was interesting. I patted her cheek; I wanted to wring her neck. "Fascinating," I said lightly. "Let me know how you make out with customs, or whatever."

I made like I was getting up. She grabbed my collar. "Steve!" she whispered, agonized about something.

"Mr. Lasker," I said briskly. "I'm your boss, not your friend. Take your problem to Charley; he's softheaded."

"I'll give Charley an exclusive," she whispered three inches from my face. "I could tie up the spacetron for the next two days with this story.

"This is Pundra Doh's wife!"

I sank back on my haunches and stared at her. "You've stowed a Martian *woman* on this tub?"

She nodded a small nod, once.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and I guess it wasn't gently.

"The holiest of all holy Martian women, the Premier's woman!"

"Yes, Mr. Lasker."

I was speechless and, I will admit, scared. This was real serious business. This no newsman on Mars would wade into without a clearance covered with red seals and blazing with blue ribbons. The Martians were *touchy* about their women, and they meant it.

And our doll, our Deborah had done this all by herself. But why? I asked the burning question even if it was crazy, "You didn't kidnap her, did you? Just for laughs or something?"

"Steve, please!"

She was scared. I loosened a button on my collar. "Okay, baby, give it to me. All of it. You realize this constitutes a breach of faith with the Mar-

tians. Not to mention an assault on U.F.S. policy. A lot of people are going to find their heads on the block if this gets out."

"Well, I don't know about that," Deborah said quietly. "I was asked to do this. To arrange this trip for Laapet, in exactly this way. And I gave it a lot of thought before I agreed to do it."

"L a a p e t? The lady's name?"

She nodded. She backed away a little, down on her elbow again. She had been upsetting that close; even with everything else charging through my brain, I noticed it. Had she?

"I was at the *Celestial* when the first news from Ul broke," Deborah said. "I was about to go to bed, as a matter of fact, when the Martian innkeep hammered on my door and told me about the disaster. I packed my gear right away and got transportation for rescue headquarters. I figured the biggest picture-wise things would be happening there. Besides, I wanted to help if I could.

"I hadn't gone very far from the *Celestial* when my vehicle was stopped by a Martian."

I listened to her story incredulously. It was eerie and unbelievable. There in the merciless cold of the white-lighted night desert Deborah had made the first crossing into the secret, private world of the Martians.

THE MAN who intercepted her appeared out of the night, without warning. Tall and slender in a cloak of soft furs, his feet in fine leather quilted boots, the tall glittering oxygen cone crested with the phoenix-like emblem of the ruling group—he was regal, and tragic with uncertainty. He had no taste for his mission but he was urgent.

He frightened Deborah with his intensity but she trusted him. The way you always trusted the Martians. She left her chauffeur to wait for her and went with him in his machine. They drove into the desert for a long while, in silence. He did not tell her what to expect, but it was obviously important and secret. He was without attendants. He did not even have a driver but operated his own vehicle.

"I could not understand why I had been chosen," Deborah said. "But I had the feeling that I was very unimportant, in myself."

They came to the rendezvous spot where one of the

larger and better land machines waited—like a black monument rising from the white sand. Inside, Laapet waited. He had taken her to his sister, Pundra Doh's wife.

The compartment was luxurious and dimly lit. Laapet sat behind semi-opaque hangings, shy, frightened and all but invisible. But desperate. Her two children were in Ul and she was beside herself with anxiety for them.

Deborah's face was very soft and saddened. I understood something, suddenly, something I had not come close to before. Laapet was not a stowaway to Deborah, or a diplomatic catastrophe, but a woman distraught with concern for her children. If Deborah had any motivation it was to help this other woman—even if she broke the iron rules of the Martian code. She was, in that instant, an entire woman, herself.

And what could you do about it? Forget you were a good guy, too, someplace in your cynical old fibers? And just berate her for getting you involved in an absolutely untenable situation—one that would presently have the Ambassador, himself, running for a bromo fizz?

"So, she wanted to go to Ul. And you were the only woman going and she trusted you to understand?" I said it as gently as I could. Maybe Deborah understood that I understood, for once.

Deborah was thoughtful. "I don't understand all of it," she said slowly. "She was, naturally, not permitted to accompany the Premier. I'm sure she didn't even ask. If you know anything about the way they rear their children, here . . ." she said expectantly, and I nodded because I had read a report or two on the subject.

"Well, it seems she had been ill—not physically, but emotionally, I gather. She was unstable and the children were sent to Ul on a holiday, to escape her tensions. Since they had been sent to Ul because of her, she felt it was her fault they were in danger. And because she knew they would receive no better attention, or be found more quickly, under the Martian code, she decided to go herself to make sure they would survive."

"They will not honor her for it," I said. And I was doubtful that Madame Pundra's stability had returned.

"I am sure they won't," Deborah said bitterly. "But I can understand that her children are worth more to

her than her honor. And maybe that's an instinct that's common to all mothers regardless of their origin."

I couldn't argue with her. I didn't say that maybe if Madame Pundra had been well, emotionally, according to Martian standards, she wouldn't have done it. What was the point?

THE generators of the *Starfish* hammered through the silence that hung between us. I had never before been touched emotionally, myself, by anything Martian. And here, suddenly, I was a hapless party to a certain tragedy —all the more tragic because it was based on mores I did not understand entirely, or sympathize with.

"Maybe we can help her avoid dishonor?"

Deborah shrugged. "She will, in any event, confess to having petitioned us into helping her. The Martians do not dissemble. That will be enough to condemn her."

I shook myself out of a peculiar gloom. "There may be a way," I said, but I doubted it. "How did you ever get her on board? And where is she? And how did she ever hear about you?"

Deborah looked tired. "The plan was to smuggle her aboard in my portable developing unit; it worked out very smoothly. I don't know how she heard about me. I wish she hadn't."

"That makes two of us," I muttered. "Deborah?"

Her mouth shook a little. "Yes, Steve, I know." Her voice was a register lower and all but inaudible. "I'm glad I can count on you, you louse."

Something pretty incredible was happening to us. In spite of the way she phrased it she was suddenly not out there striding along manfully by herself, any more. Nor had she ever been. To have her suddenly lapse atavistically into a woman instead of a termagent was more than I could handle. I, who had all but resigned myself to the inevitable, eventual appeal of one of the moronic but less assertive ewes of our society! How had Deborah been flushed through the nets and traps and conditioners of our psychologists—to land, thus, a compound personality in my lap?

Here, I thought exultantly, is no glitteringly compatible equal with every brain impulse carefully measured, and every muscle vibrating in harmony with the males on her level. But a thoroughly mixed-up female in the ro-

mantic tradition of the last century!

"You damned little fake," I said huskily.

"It took you the longest time to figure me out," Deborah sighed. "I hope you'll treat it as a confidential disclosure or they'll try to cure me and make me *normal.*"

"Heaven forbid!" I let her voice crawl up and down my spine with a freedom I'd never allowed before. It made me feel pretty drunk.

I looked at her and her eyes were green and wide. "God, you're beautiful," I said with the unbidden frankness that comes with any kind of drunkenness.

"You make me feel that way," she said.

I touched her hand very briefly. "It'll turn out as good as I can manage."

"I needed you, Steve. I was so afraid you wouldn't be there. I couldn't be alone with this one. She's going to *kill* herself, Steve."

"Aren't any of her people interested in helping her? What about her brother?"

"Another potential suicide, I suppose," Deborah said bitterly. "He's with Pundra Doh in the lead ship. He will ostensibly take over when he reaches Ul."

"Well, heaven bless him."

I DIDN'T have to go back and sit next to Charley, but I did. I had a couple of things to think about and if I'd stayed with Deborah I would have thought about only one of them.

Charley was half asleep. Raeburn seemed to be asleep. Vechi was reading. I leaned back and closed my eyes. And still I thought about only one thing. Deborah. Not thinking, really, feeling. I resented Pundra Doh's wife for crowding in on that feeling. And for the vague presentiment I had about Vechi. And Charley's eternally undisturbed equanimity.

Deborah! I wished we were anywhere but where we were. With this new thing to explore and understand. I wanted to be near her, alone. But everything had its price; I had been conditioned successfully enough to accept that.

There was Laapet, Madame Pundra. And what if her brother did not materialize when we reached Ul?

I opened my eyes and watched Charley. He was pouring a shot from his bottle. "Here, pal," he said, "have a medicinal."

I wondered if we would have to tell him about Laapet? Not yet. "Wait," I told myself reassuringly, "her brother

will take the whole thing off your hands." But I wasn't sure. I had the uneasy feeling that something would prevent it.

I glanced at Deborah. She was lying on her back, staring at the dome of the *Starfish.* She didn't look like she was thinking about us, only.

Charley was tuned in on the same vibration band. He gave me the answer. "You know," he said quietly, "I've been thinking about Vechi. I don't like his being on the *Starfish.*"

"Go fight the R.A.," I said sarcastically.

"I don't like other things, too," he went on, ignoring me. "Why hasn't one of the pilots come out for a smoke, yet? Or a drink—or for some bright chatter with us educated chaps?"

"Things too dull for you, pal?" I asked routinely. It hadn't penetrated, yet.

Charley had on his patient expression. "Listen, Brain. While you and Debby were having your big conference I went to the men's lounge to gargle my throat. It's a funny thing how cautious the R.A.'s getting; the door to the control room is locked. I tried it gently. If they didn't want to come out and talk to us—I thought I'd go talk to them."

My stomach froze into a hard knot. I looked at Charley and he said, "There's the barest possibility that Vechi is pulling a fast one. Figure that he wants a diranium sample. With a couple of pals driving this bus he could get into and out of Ul slick as anything."

"But we complicate things," I muttered hopefully.

"It's four to two if you don't count Debby for a muscle man. And with the element of surprise on their side, they think—what have they got to worry about?"

"Vechi wouldn't dare—not with the whole R.A. out there to protect the mines!"

"I dunno," Charley said. "He's real cool."

"Well, well," I said. I was thinking about the additional complication of Madame Pundra. "And if you aren't just off on a pipe night how do we find out for sure? And then what, Charley?"

"I don't know, Master Brain. You think about it. No man of action, I!"

"Why would the control room be locked?" I mused.

"I don't know, Brain."

"Do you suppose Vechi thinks we've caught on?"

"No. He's a Superior Type; to him we're just alcoholic writer chaps."

"I'm glad you're a student of human nature, Charley, old pal. But how do we act effectively without a weapon of some sort?"

"Now, it's real hilarious," Charley said with a broad smile, "but say I had a vision, or planned a stick-up on the First National Bank of Ul. I have a popgun in my gear."

Well. Old Charley. You never could tell.

"Where is it?"

"It has taken the bottle down two inches but I've managed to get it out of the gear-bag and into my work-alls."

"A real efficient type, Charley, old pal." I looked about me wondering if we weren't just imagining everything. And if the Ul disaster weren't enough reason for this trip. "How about Deborah?"

"If we had a game of stud king," Charley said, fishing out a token, "and Debby joined us, we could have a lot of conversation between hands."

"Heads," I said clearly.

"Son of a space cook," he said loudly. "You deal."

I glanced at Vechi casually, as though satisfying myself that he didn't want to be disturbed. He was looking at us over his book. He smiled, I thought, in a superior way.

"Want to lose some money?" I called to Deborah.

"I've got some change," she said, sitting up.

And so we commenced to play stud king on a cleared-off space on the floor. Between the laughs we got in a lot of conversation.

WE FIGURED we had time. The trip to Ul took four hours and we were only half-way there. If Vechi was up to something it would probably involve a "forced" landing somewhere just outside of Ul, away from the main rocket fleet. After all, what he wanted was in Ul.

If the pilots and Raeburn were in on the deal with him —and they had to be—we were badly outnumbered. Our only chance was not in waiting but in somehow getting control of the *Starfish* while it was still aloft. And of contacting the lead ship for help.

Deborah was scared. And I was glad she was scared. And I was glad she didn't turn up a single, bright idea for our salvation. Except that she would have to tell Madame Pundra about this development.

It was then that we told Charley about our stowaway. It was to his credit that his expression remained un-

changed. And indicative of something that his only excitement was at the possibility of finally seeing a Martian woman.

It may have seemed very little to go on, our conviction that Vechi was masterminding a coup. But it's the little things that make you suspicious. The R.A. is made up of casual characters. They like to talk, gripe about no smoking in the control room, come back to sniff out a drink or a game of stud king, maybe an off-color story. There seems to be a kind of conspiracy to get the rockets to fly themselves while the pilots visit aft—or so it seems to the passengers.

You get to expect informalities from the R.A.; they're usual. And it's the kind of detail a slick, factual guy like Vechi could overlook, or think you might overlook, if he were planning something. The longer the pilots stayed away —the more certain we were.

We were also sure that if Vechi and Raeburn were in the pay of an Earth syndicate to get hold of diranium ore they could have slugged the pilots of the *Starfish,* put in their own crew and trailed along with the rescue fleet. We didn't represent much of a threat; they could dump us anyplace. The *Starfish* was no beauty but she could make the trip back to Earth.

We did not want to think they were planning to do anything more serious than dump us. And Charley and I were determined that Vechi wasn't going to reduce us to a trio of dumb pawns. But I guess we couldn't help what happened, at that. There was another mighty powerful piece in this chess game we hadn't even thought about.

Deborah was hopeful almost to the end that we were just imagining the whole thing. "How can we be sure?" she wanted to know.

Then Charley had the inspiration. He remembered one of the pilots permanently assigned to the *Starfish,* Fats Berenson. The joke was that Fats was too big for the sleek speed-boats up ahead but better suited to this boxcar.

"If Fats were aboard," Charley said, looking over a new hand of stud king, "he would have been out here two hours ago and using every gimmick to stay out here. He's just naturally the laziest slob in the R.A. Besides, I owe him some money from an old bet. Knowing from the passenger list that I was aboard he would have come up from hell, itself, to collect."

"But we're still not sure," Deborah insisted.

"Tell you what," Charley said quietly, raking in a pot, "I'm going to find out who the pilots are. I'll use the gun on the lock—and keep the boys at the controls orderly after that. Then I'll try to contact the lead ship for help. If the pilots aren't old friends."

"The hero type," I muttered. But I was grateful he had the gun. "Okay, Charley. I'll keep Vechi occupied and Deborah can take off to the ladies' lounge for safety, and to tell Madame Pundra what we plan to do."

"You got it, Bright Boy," Charley grinned. "Debby leaves first and then I stroll out real casual. It doesn't matter if Vechi and Raeburn catch wise once I've contacted the lead ship. They won't dare pull anything because the *Electra* could catch this tub with half its generators conked out."

"It's a comforting thought," I said. And then I looked at Deborah. "Go on," I told her, "get out of here and stay out of sight until I collect you. I've got my mark on you."

It caught Charley off balance. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "Where was I when this happened?"

"Lushing it up," I said. I watched Deborah get up and leave the compartment. Vechi watched her, too. His chest heaved up as though he were sighing wearily; he turned a page in his book and looked at Raeburn. His assistant lay flat on his back. His wide mouth hung open slack, ugly and resonant with a snore. Vechi went back to his book.

Then, with some elaborate stretching, Charley stood up and I watched him leave, too. Vechi watched him go, as well. He glanced at me, pleasantly.

"The bum," I said conversationally, "he took me for ten fish in stud king!"

"That so?" Vechi smiled agreeably. He folded his book. And then he very calmly reached into the pocket of his work-all and took out a gun. He held it very steadily and it was aimed at me.

"You can't win at everything," he said. "Some days aren't lucky." He had a nice sense of the ironic.

Raeburn, beside him, snored peacefully. And I sat there numb and helpless.

"What in the hell is that for?" I asked and my throat was full of gravel.

Vechi smiled as if I should know and I thought I did. But I was never more mistaken.

THEN Vechi did a strange thing. He prodded Raeburn with his foot. It took a lot of prodding to wake him. When Raeburn's eyes opened he was looking straight down the blast channels of Vechi's weapon. It was a hell of a way to wake up. His Adam's apple froze half way through a convulsion of shock.

"Get up," Vechi said gently, "and get over there with our friend in the press box."

Raeburn was a little slow in comprehending and from the way Vechi urged him with the toe of his boot you could tell nobody loved Raeburn.

It didn't figure. The timing was off. Why the switch on Raeburn? Vechi was going to need help getting what he wanted in Ul. If there was going to be a double-cross, why now? Before Raeburn had been useful? Or was Raeburn in on it at all?

"Now, look, Vechi," I blustered, "this is a pretty dumb joke. What's it all about?"

He smiled. "It's no joke."

Raeburn, who was now sitting beside me, stared at his boss in amazement. "You're crazy," he bleated. "You can't pull this thing off by yourself!"

Vechi ignored him. "I'm afraid, Mr. Lasker, I can't wait any longer. You and your friends might discover certain irregularities about this flight. If you haven't, already."

I had nothing to say.

He went on in quiet earnest, "I am about to put into action a plan of great personal importance to me and I must warn you against any opposition. I have no desire to injure you or your colleagues. But there must be no interference."

I listened to Vechi and I watched, fascinated. The man with the gun in his hands was a different personality. The superficial oiliness had washed off clean, revealing, surprisingly, a man I felt I could like. I was less and less sure of his objective. Raeburn was obviously thunderstruck by the turn of events.

Vechi's hard, tanned face was grim. He was a determined man. He got up lightly and his arm reached for a hand-grip on the side of the compartment. The gun covered us. "We are almost at Faleeng," he said to me. "There we part company."

I thought about that; I was agreeable. But I also thought about Charley and how he was making out, if at all. And about Deborah. And last, but not least, about Madame Pundra. Vechi was obviously

planning to herd Deborah and Charley into the "press box" as they returned to the compartment.

"Why Faleeng?" I asked. "The diranium is at Ul."

He grinned in genuine amusement. "That is very true," he agreed. "But I am not interested in diranium."

Raeburn made a peculiar sound and Vechi looked at him with contempt. "Raeburn is, however. I'm afraid I'm going to be a great disappointment to him."

I began to feel something of Raeburn's incredulity. If Vechi wasn't going for diranium what in hell was he going for? I opened my mouth to say something like that when the door to the compartment slid back.

I jumped to my feet and would probably have tried something asinine if Vechi hadn't waved me back with his gun. "He's all right," he said.

Charley, our hero, was being carried in on the powerful shoulders of a Martian serf. The Martian, in an ill-fitting R.A. uniform, was one of the semi-slave groups, strong, brutish, and low on the Martian scale of evolution. He put Charley down very gently at Vechi's command.

I ENVIED Charley his blissful oblivion but not the collision he must have sustained with his ham-handed friend. I tried to spot the emblem on the Martian's wrist band; I could have learned which Martian house he belonged to. But no luck. I don't think I was even greatly surprised to discover we had Martians on board.

"All right, Vechi," I said. "What's your game?" The explanations were a little overdue.

What *were* Martians doing in the control room, Martians who obviously belonged to some powerful family? Why was Vechi hijacking an R.A. ship?

"This will become obvious shortly," Vechi said quietly. "I need the *Starfish* because I am about to make a long journey, a journey which no authority on Mars will permit in the orthodox fashion." He looked tired but oddly relaxed and deeply happy; it was a tantalizing combination.

"You can't get away with it," I said. And I didn't know what he was trying to get away with.

"I think it possible." Vechi looked at Raeburn. Then he looked back at me. I was staring at the Martian. Standing by the door, with folded arms,

oblique black eyes and inscrutable features he made the scene more than unreal.

Vechi waited for me to return his glance. He shrugged at Raeburn. "This is the human garbage you can try, and sentence, and imprison. His crime is greed. He wants money. He will sell anything for money. He is a contact man for the Andean Research Society on Earth. And they are curious about diranium. They pay well. When Raeburn is finished they will send someone else, and someone else. Their persistence is as great as their greed. They have no morality. Eventually, they will succeed, I have no doubt."

"You were in it with me!" Raeburn cried. "It was your plan to go to Ul!"

Vechi paid him no attention. "My crime is something else again," he said softly. "If it is a crime."

Vechi, clinging to the hand grip, was a strangely intense figure in the compartment. I felt that he directed no ill will towards me. That he was even appealing to me in some way.

"Presently, Lasker," he said to me, "you will be able to judge my crime for yourself. It is no easy judgment to make.

"But I have no desire to bare myself before this obscene caricature of man!"

"Rocz!" he said sharply. He inclined his head to Raeburn.

The powerful Martian moved across the compartment. In the pale blue light Raeburn's vast brow glittered with perspiration. His lips twisted back in the ugliness of terror.

It was over as suddenly as his cry. And infinitely less painful. The Martian went back to his position by the door and I discovered that my breathing was normal again; Raeburn was only unconscious.

Vechi slid his gun back in his pocket. What need had he of it? Then he went to the compartment door and slid it open.

I should have known it was coming, but I didn't. I said, later, that I had suspected it, but I hadn't.

SHE came in. She was gold and violet and seemed to float in a cloud of silk. She was tiny and slender and her oblique dark eyes looked first at Vechi, and then at me. There was in her manner the shyness of deer and the brightness of birds. This, then, was Vechi's treasure. I could blame him for nothing.

I had not noticed Deborah. I was stunned; she was too. She looked like a bewitched child in the presence of a fairy. Who was, of course, Laapet.

The powerful Martian, Rocz, had dropped to one knee at her entrance, shielded his face with one hand, and kept his eyes fixed on us. I marveled at his restraint and the conditioning which kept him from staring with the rest of us. If I had kicked Charley into sensibility at that point our relations today might be better; he has never really forgiven me.

Laapet touched Deborah very gently—so that she came over to me. I rose to my feet and put my arm around Deborah; she was trembling.

"Oh, Steve," she whispered huskily.

Vechi took his eyes from Laapet and looked at us.

"There is something more valuable on Mars than diranium—to me," he said. "You have guessed, of course, at her identity. And you can understand, now, why we must make a long journey to be with each other."

I realized suddenly that we had been duped. That Laapet had used Deborah and me—and our faith in her honesty. It came as a greater shock

than I imagined it would. The bubble had burst and these proud, untouchable people had become suspect and ugly with one lie. The disillusionment made me belligerent.

"She is Pundra Doh's wife," I said to Vechi.

"She is Pundra's concubine," Vechi said gently. "She will be my wife."

"And what of her poor children in Ul?"

"They are Pundra's children. Under the system she is a communal mother. They are with their true mother in Ul."

"She lied," I said obstinately. I had been deceived into sympathy. She had used a powerful and terrible weapon and I remembered the ancient proverb, "God deliver us from the lies of honest men."

But Vechi perceived my disillusionment and all of its meaning. "Yes," he said. "It is necessary for others to lie before they can live by our code."

"You can't blame her duplicity on us," I said.

"Only in so far as we are not acceptable to the people who live in truth. And those who would live with us must break into truth. As she has been forced to do—to protect our secret. It has not been easy for her."

"Steve, Steve, can't you see that it must have been terrible for her?" I looked at Deborah.

"Yes, I suppose it must have been. But—how could you have met?"

"It happened three years ago," Vechi told us. "There was an accident in the desert. Laapet's driver had been killed in an explosion in her machine. I came along quite by chance and I helped her. It was not difficult to fall in love with her."

I watched the man unbelievingly. For three years he, too, had practised deceit. He had deliberately permitted rumor to distort his purpose and character and reputation. And during those three years, his frequent and mysterious trips—were they to see Laapet? I asked him.

"No," he said, "I have been building a place of refuge for us. We could not stay here, and where could we be at ease on Earth?"

"And that is why you are taking the *Starfish,* to make the trip?"

"I am borrowing it," Vechi said. "Rocz and the pilot will return it once we have reached our destination."

Deborah moved within my arm. Her voice was deep with sympathy for them. "They are going to Venus, Steve.

Vechi built them a place where they can live in peace. In exile."

So LAAPET had confessed everything to Deborah, already. Deborah with her wide, green eyes, her childish faith in the romantic and her woman's voice. My hand ran tightly down the length of her arm and closed over her fingers.

Deborah said to me, "They wanted you to know the truth about them. So that if there are lies about them, someone will tell the truth."

"And what of Pundra Doh?" I asked Vechi. "Do you think he'll permit this? And what of the Earth colony? Have you thought about the repercussions?"

Laapet spoke directly to me, and for the first time. "There will be no repercussions," she said gently. "Pundra may say many things because he will speak what he feels. But he will not blame you who are blameless, only us. And for him I am dead. He will be grateful to me that I have left his house and his world. It would pain him to punish me because he is kind and good."

Vechi was not inclined to dwell on Pundra's virtues. "Lasker," he said, "as a newsman you can have a field day with this story. As a gentleman," he went on, "you can respect a trust."

"You have my word," I said. "But what's the good of telling me if you don't want the story told?"

"Some day," he smiled, "it will occur to you that the time has come to tell this story, when people will not be at all interested in its implications. Though they should be."

I did not understand him, then. But I agreed. "And what will you do with us?"

"Send you down in an 'egg.' The space-raft will hold the four of you. Once we are over Faleeng we'll release it."

"And just how will I explain the disappearance of the *Starfish?*"

"I don't think there will be any trouble," Vechi smiled. "You can tell them you caught Vechi and Raeburn in a diranium conspiracy, that Vechi pulled a double-cross and got away. It will explain the pilots Raeburn slugged back in Marsport, too. It will do for popular consumption; they expect something like this of me anyway."

"You still don't mind being called a rat?" I said.

Vechi drew Laapet closer to him. "No," he said.

"But why did you drag Raeburn in on this?"

"He's my peace offering to the ambassador, and to Pundra. There's a complete file on Raeburn in my office in Marsport. The ambassador and Pundra will arrive at a diplomatic understanding about the rest, I'm sure. It won't get out that I left with Laapet."

A buzzer sounded in the *Starfish*. "That'll be Faleeng," Vechi said.

Rocz carried Raeburn, and then Charley into the "egg." They were still unconscious.

Before we got in Deborah impulsively took Laapet's hands in hers.

"I hope you make out, Vechi," I said.

Some of the strain shucked off him. "Thanks, pal," he smiled and while I was shaking hands with him I realized I admired him tremendously. But I did not envy him.

When the door to the "egg" had screwed shut, I turned to Deborah. We were almost alone—Charley and Raeburn were beyond reach. I took her in my arms and I kissed her.

"I've caught it, too," I said. "I don't want to live on Venus—but will set up housekeeping with me someplace less strenuous?"

"Oh, Steve," she whispered in that husky voice that belonged to me as of then, "what else would I rather do?"

She took some more pictures, though, when we finally got to Ul, and I used them. But not the story about Vechi and Laapet. Not until now—now that the Martian diplomat has learned double talk, and his wife pours tea and smiles for the news cameras. They aren't untouchable any more.

Which is the point I like to make, whenever I can. Though Vechi is right—nobody is particularly interested. If anything, they're much more comfortable now that the Martians are—different.

More like us.

And it's *our* fault.

∞ ∞ ∞

WE APOLOGIZE! The birth of INFINITY coincided neatly with the brand-new paper shortage you've probably read about, with the result that both the second and third issues have been late in appearing. This won't happen again—and that's putting it mildly: we have some major improvements in the works, and they'll begin to show up next issue. Don't miss it!

There was one,

and only one, thing

Clifton could do. Even

so, he made the worst of

100 possible choices!

Death in Transit

by JERRY SOHL

Illustrated by EMSH

CLIFTON stood at the bottom of the shaft, his face white, his eyes wide, his stance against the bulkhead that of a man who needed only a slight push to slump to the floor.

"Karen," he murmured. "Karen."

He had been standing there a long time.

He was staring at his dead wife, a heap of broken bones and blood on the floor. But he was not seeing her—at least not as she was now. He was seeing her the way his mind kept bringing her back to him: the white evenness of her teeth when she smiled, the fury of her bright blue eyes when she was angry, the way she had uncomplainingly slept on the wrinkled sheets of the bed he had made when she had been ill ten years before, and the way they had laughed about that when she reminded him of it years later. He moved to stand erect, wondering why he should have thought about that at a time like this, and then, as he looked at her again and saw what the fall had done to her, he clenched his hands in anger.

They had said it couldn't happen! But they had been wrong. Man's wisdom was not infinite after all. All the

man-years of thought, all the endless whirring and clicking of the computers and calculators—all of it had not taken into account what might happen to Karen.

His hands fell open. He knew that actually, they had never been wrong. If he had found her right away, he could have put her back together. He could have utilized the synthesizer for anything really bad, like a shattered bone. The needles of the organic analyzer would have told him what else he had to do.

But Karen had been dead for hours when he found her. Too long. The damage was irreparable, permanent. She was beyond recall. He might conceivably have animated her muscles, her glands, got her blood to flowing again. But her brain would have remained a vacuous, inert thing. You had to get reconstruction going in a matter of minutes when the brain, the anatomy's most perishable component, was involved. And in some cases he had known, the memories were never fully restored.

Why couldn't it have been a tumor? A deficiency disease? A nervous breakdown? Insanity . . . There was nothing the medocenter couldn't handle. Its machines were right there on the ship, ready to be used—but Karen had to fall down the ventilator shaft, opening the door and walking into it as if it were her bedroom, and falling all the way down and breaking half the bones in her body.

And he had found her too late. Hours too late.

"Too late," he said, and he nodded his head in agreement. And then he was engulfed in sudden pity and remorse and a feeling of loss, as if she had snatched a vital part of him in her going. And hadn't she? Hadn't she taken her laughter with her, the laughter that brightened his days? And the things they had shared . . .

He glared at her, suddenly angry that she should have done this to him, and he glared at the shaft and blew out his cheeks and clenched his hands again and roared a great cry that echoed deafeningly in the smallness of the shaft.

And then he shouted obscenities at the ship and the stars and the hundred people who lay as if dead in neat rows in the sleep locker and he pounded the walls until blood from his hands left imprints there.

But no one heard. There

was no one to hear. Only the sleepers who lived their days with his years.

"Why?" he shouted, while his tears fell. And he thought: I haven't cried since I was a kid. Then, saying her name again and again, he knelt by her side to feel the silkiness of her jet black hair.

THERE had been no death aboard a Star Transit ship since the very beginning. From the first day of the Great Emigration more than a hundred years before, when the first captain and his wife stepped aboard to pilot the precious cargo of sleeping humans ten or more years across the vast stellar reaches to colonies on planets in a half dozen far-distant star systems, there had been no recorded death.

But now there would always be Karen.

He should have told them she walked in her sleep. But the Medical Examiners would have shrugged as they had with everything else he had told them. The medocenters would take care of it. You couldn't *cure* sleepwalking with the devices in the medocenter, but they would have taken care of anything that happened as a result—if he had reached her in time. It was unforeseen, this business of her walking into the shaft. No one was to blame. No one, that is, except himself.

Clifton looked up from beside his wife to the circle of light at the top of the shaft. "All right," he called out, "I'm to blame, do you hear? I did it. She could be alive except for me."

There was no answer to his self-indictment.

"And where does it leave me?" he shouted bitterly. "I'm the one who has to live and I've got nine years to go. Nine years to Ostarpa and the small colony there. What am I supposed to do?

He never remembered later how long he stood in the shaft shouting until he was hoarse, only recalling that at one point the walls seemed to close in on him and the ship seemed filled with an oppressive strangeness, and he was clawing his way up the ladder to the top. And there were blurred images of walls and rooms as he ran about the ship, and he remembered his jerking open the liquor cabinet and the stupor that followed.

It was days later when he sobered and, insulated by the intervening unreality, managed to dispose of her body in a waste chute.

Then he moved to the office and saw that it was the 371st day and looked at the log to see that he had stopped making entries on the 363rd day. He examined the other books. Karen's precise handwriting had recorded her final readings on that day, too. Now he would have to do her work as well as his own.

Clifton sighed, sat at his desk and, in a steady hand, wrote in the log:

Karen rose in her sleep, walked to and fell down the right aft third level ventilating shaft and was killed. Reached her approximately three hours after the incident. She could not be saved.

Clifton West, Captain

Skipping to the 371st day, he wrote:

Sent Karen's body out the ventral waste chute.

He sat studying the words, then added:

Am alone on the ship.

Instantly he wished he had not written that, but was not moved to cross the words out. It was true enough. He was alone. Would be alone nine more years.

Suppose something should happen to him? Who would land the ship? And what would happen to the sleepers?

He did not want to think about it. The medocenter would take care of everything. He didn't walk in his sleep. His duty was to get the hundred humans through to Ostarpa and then they all would become part of the colony there, except of course he'd be ten years older than the sleepers upon awakening. He looked at the day gauge on the wall. Just 3,332 days short of Ostarpa.

Three thousand three hundred and thirty-two days without Karen! An eternity of talking to himself and listening only to the sound of his own feet as he walked about the ship. A lifetime for remembrance, just as he remembered now how eager they both had been to make the trip, how she had shared the rigorous training. It had been a chance of a lifetime: ten years of being together! Time to meditate, to ponder the problems of life, of all humanity, of each other. They had thought soberly of it as an opportunity to make something of themselves—write a great play, solve a great problem. But they had never got around to that. The first year had been only the sheer delight of each other's company. He wondered if it would have ever changed. How fast it had gone!

And now it was over and the nine years ahead loomed like a dark tunnel, large and forbidding.

CLIFTON slammed the palms of his hands on the desk. Enough of that. He was captain of the ship and he had duties. He could not spend his time in the past. There were things to do. He must keep himself occupied. He must not think of her.

But he did.

Even though the days stretched into weeks he still found his steps faltering every time he walked past rooms where he had often looked for her. For one thing there was the stereo room where Karen loved to spend leisure hours. He never saw much in stereo, but she seemed to enjoy it. And there was the music taperoom, the massage parlor, the baths. She seemed to have a need of them. But all Clifton had ever needed was her.

He passed the jammed clothes locker, filled with enough apparel to last her ten years. He could not force himself to open it, though Karen seldom had opened it herself. She had made most of her own clothes, taking the material out of the huge storage bins.

He found himself one day in her sewing room, a room she had converted from a nursery, storing the nursery stuff until such a time as it was needed and installing her sewing machine and getting to work. They had joked about how, when they landed on Ostarpa, all the clothes in the locker would be still intact because she so enjoyed fashioning her own. Once he had asked her what was to become of them.

"We'll start a dress shop, darling," Karen had said quickly as if she had already thought about it, which is the way she answered everything. "The sleeper women will want several changes right away."

"You know," he replied, "I think I'll be your manager, set you up. Karen West, Ostarpa's great dress designer. You'll have lots of business and we'll make a fortune."

"I'm not that good," she said, but her face glowed with joy.

Even as he stood there he could hear the words as if they were said a moment ago and he felt as if he should at any moment hear the click of her heels across the floor, and when she'd enter the room, she'd say, "Clifton,

what in the world are you doing here?"

The Transit Service had been right. No man was an island. A man might be for a day, perhaps, or a week or even longer. But not for ten years. That's why the service had insisted a man and his wife, proven psychologically compatible, serve together as co-captains of each transit liner.

So it wasn't right that he should spend the next nine years a lonely man. Karen was gone, but what about those hundred people in the sleep locker? He needed someone, a companion, someone to talk to, someone to take Karen's place. Not a woman, of course. That would not be right. Especially after Karen. There could be no other woman like Karen. Besides, suppose they didn't like each other?

"No," he said, standing in the sewing room and shaking his head, "it must not be a woman."

And then he brought himself back to reality. No sleeper had ever been awakened before the liner reached its destination. "And no sleeper is going to be awakened on this trip," he said firmly. He had the power to wake any or all of them in an emergency, but his own personal emergency hardly constituted grounds for that.

But suppose something happens to me? he reminded himself again. Who's going to carry on?

And then he set his lips close together, turned on his heel and left the sewing room. "Nothing," he said aloud, "is going to happen to you. That's why they put medocenters on these ships." And he went to the place and spent the afternoon being checked over.

He found himself in perfect health. For some reason he was disappointed.

THE WEEKS passed slowly, but they did pass, and Clifton busied himself with exhaustive checks throughout the entire ship, interested himself in the stereos (they weren't so bad now that he had nothing else to do), music tapes (he weeded out the ones he didn't like), massages (he was pleased to discover they left him with a glow), books (funny how hard it was to read after the ease of stereo), mathematics (how much he'd forgotten), a few languages (German was still his hardest), moods of writing (he just did not have the knack),

painting (he was always drawing machinery and wondering why)—and found the image of Karen's laughing blue eyes still there at the edge of his mind, though curiously distant, as if it were one of the stereos he had seen.

Then the hunger started.

He sat for long hours in the chill of the sleep locker and envied the sleepers there, row on row, all of them without a worry, without thought, trustful of him, confident he would get them through, none of them knowing Karen was dead and not caring, and he had an urge to wake them all and throw a furious party to end all parties.

And sometimes he'd have a party there all by himself.

And then he grew to hate them. When he did, he went to the medocenter and this was erased and he was made whole again.

But the hunger got worse.

"Karen, Karen!" And he finally wondered if it was really Karen he wanted. And the medocenter only made his hunger worse and he cursed the efficiency of it.

Then one day he got out the file of the sleepers, went through it from Abelard, Johannes, to Yardley, Greta, and put the pictures in the stereo and saw what the sleepers looked like and wondered which of them would prove the most companionable. Which man, that is, for a woman . . . well, it just would not be right to awaken a woman. It would not look right in the log, for one thing, and he was sure all he needed was another person to talk to and it might as well be a man. After all, man is a gregarious animal. If he had someone to talk to . . .

He turned back through the file for Hedstrom, George, a pleasant looking fellow of thirty—which would make him five years Clifton's junior—and in passing he came upon the picture of Portia Lavester again. He slipped the picture in the stereo and spent a long time looking at it. Quite a girl. Blonde. Unlike Karen in that respect. And she wore her hair longer. Her eyes weren't as blue as Karen's. But her skin was darker. Sun? Karen didn't like the sun. It made her freckled. But this girl must have lived in it. The stereo was inadequate, however. It didn't tell how she laughed. *Did* she laugh? Was it pleasing?

He put it down and looked at the record. Portia Lavester. Twenty years old. Five-

feet-three. Weight 109. He looked at the picture again. The weight was well distributed.

He shuffled the picture back in the pile, tried to concentrate on Hedstrom, George. A logical choice among the single men. Mechanical background. He peeked at the Lavester record again. The girl was a home economics expert. She'd do well on Ostarpa. Or on the ship.

Clifton sighed and shoved the file away. Only then did he realize how much he had missed Karen's cooking. The ship's electronic cookery was all right, but it left much to be desired. It had no personal touch.

But to get back to Hedstrom. How would the fellow act if he awakened him? Immediately he thought of the girl and wondered what she would be like.

"Stop it!" he admonished himself. "She's much too young." And he started going through looking at the other single women. The girl Lavester was clearly the nicest. Again he studied her.

And again he forced himself to go back to the man.

Finally he decided to do nothing at present, left the office and started his rounds, determined to think of other things.

Eventually he found himself in the sleep locker looking for number 33, Portia Lavester's compartment. He saw it and discovered it was no different from number 57, the compartment of George Hedstrom. The same black oblong box with the ribbon of red plastic where it was sealed near the top. It would be easy to activate the rollers, move it out of line and out to the medocenter, rip off the plastic and charge the contents with life. He wiped away a few dust motes and found that to him the box suddenly seemed different from the others.

He was sweating.

Later in the tape room he listened to music and pondered the question. Suppose he awakened her and she proved to be anything but what he wanted? Sure, she was good looking, but what about her age? Her mannerisms? Would his fifteen years turn her against him? There were nine years left to Ostarpa; a lot could happen in nine years and she would eventually discover he was no ogre. She might even learn to love him. Why, she might even take Karen's place!

He clicked off the music

with a trembling hand, went to the bar, drew a double shot and ice.

Karen, Karen! Why did it have to happen to you?

Forgive me, darling, for what I am about to do.

CLIFTON watched the lard-like flesh become suffused with pink, saw the surge of color in the lips, the catch of breath and the resultant swell of breast. Then the eyelids flickered.

A moment later Portia Lavester was staring at him, and even as she did so Clifton could see she did not understand what had happened. But when the vacant eyes came alive, the girl sat up, crossed her hands to her bare, hunched shoulders and looked around frantically.

"Don't be frightened," Clifton said, smiling. "You're still on the ship. You've just been awakened."

"Thanks," she said without gratitude, "but I wasn't frightened. I was looking for something to put on."

"Oh." Clifton had forgotten about that. Now he blushed and opened a nearby drawer and withdrew a white gown. "Take this. It will have to do until I get you something else."

She took it and held it to her nakedness, eying him coldly. He turned, heard her drop quietly to the floor. "Where are the others?" she asked, and he could hear the rustle of the gown as she put it around her. "And where can I pick up my clothes?"

He turned to look at her, found her at the side of the room in front of its only mirror, inspecting her face and pushing her lush hair this way and that and grimacing. "How long ago did we land? What's Ostarpa like?"

She was lovely and not unlike Karen in manner and it was going to be harder for him than he thought.

"Was I the first or the last? Or was I in the middle? Just like me to be in the middle." She laughed a little and he was glad to hear her, though her laughter was a little lower in pitch than Karen's. And then her eyes found his in the mirror and they widened. She turned. "Why don't you say something? Is anything wrong?" Now she was frightened.

She was very young and he was glad to hear her voice and he wanted to tell her so, but he knew she wouldn't understand. So he said only, "I want to talk to you."

"What's happened?" Her eyes were panicky.

"There are no others," he blurted out.

"No others?" Her voice was shrill.

He shook his head. "I awakened you because my wife died and I needed someone." It was blunt, but he wanted to be honest with her. "The others are still asleep out there."

She stared with round eyes and a round, open mouth, and her hands fell away from her face and were lost when the gown's long sleeves fell over them.

"I—I had to hear someone talk again," Clifton said haltingly. "I went through the file. I studied all the sleepers. I decided on you. I'm sorry if—"

"How long?" she murmured, lips hardly moving.

"Long?" he answered. "What do you mean?" And then he understood. "We're a little more than a year from Earth."

Her moan startled and unnerved him. Her eyes closed and she slumped to the floor.

When she did not move, he went to her, lifted her head. At once her eyelids fluttered and she saw him and then her face darkened and she lashed out with tiny fists, scratching and crying.

"It's not as bad as all that!" he cried, half angry with her now, trying to stop her, clutching her flailing arms. He drew away quickly when she bit him.

"You—you *beast!*" she wailed. "You spoiled everything. *Everything.* Everything has been so carefully planned."

"I know, I know," he soothed.

"Oh," she quavered, and she fell to the floor again, sobbing.

Clifton got up, surveyed her weeping figure, a mound of white on the floor. Well, he thought, at least this is a change for me. And he felt rather foolish about what he had done. If only it had been a man; he could reason with a man. He turned in disgust and walked from the medocenter. She would change. After all, nine years is a long time. No woman could cry nine years. He smiled a little. Fiery little thing, isn't she? he told himself as he started his tour of the ship.

HE DIDN'T find her in the medocenter when he returned. The white gown was not there either. It was a long time before he found her lying atop one of the compartments in the sleep locker. She was still clad in the gown, a

gaunt, spiritless figure, her eyes staring at the low ceiling.

"Miss Lavester," he said, "I know it was a shock to wake up this side of Ostarpa, but believe me, I intended no harm. If only you knew the loneliness—" and he could not go on, remembering the emptiness of the days just past.

She said nothing, only blinking her eyes, pale blue eyes in a white face.

"If I'd known how upset you'd be, I'd never have awakened you," Clifton said bitterly. "If I could put you back to sleep now I would." Now her face turned toward his, eyes icy in a withering glance. She rose, a firm press of breast against the white gown as she slid off the compartment. Clifton's heart quickened. But she ignored him and walked away. She looks like Karen sleepwalking, he thought.

The next day he found her in the stereo room, dressed in one of Karen's gowns from the clothes locker, a thin, pale blue dress that accented her small waist and blonde hair. She looked ever so much like Karen. He wondered where she had slept, if she had eaten.

"Portia," he said, sitting in a nearby chair. She only sat, a still figure, staring ahead, her hair brushed back in a long sweep, glossy and smooth, and Clifton thought: My God, but she's a beautiful thing.

"Portia," he repeated, "I want to talk to you." What could he do with this girl? Was there no way to break through to her?

Portia gave him a hateful glance and rose. He watched her and his hunger was more than he could stand.

"Please," he said desperately. "Don't leave."

She turned at the doorway and looked at him coldly.

"You don't know what it means to lose your wife and have no one to talk to and have to decide what to do." He looked down at his hands embarrassedly. Why was he finding it so hard to talk to her? He felt his face coloring. "I think I'd have gone mad if I hadn't awakened you. It wasn't snap judgment, Portia. I just didn't pull your number out of a hat. You see—" He looked up. She wasn't there.

He saw her in the hallway, her head down, contemplative and walking slowly, and catching up to her and walking beside her he explained, "Suppose I'd have an acci-

dent like Karen did? Then none of you would ever land on Ostarpa. Somebody had to be awakened, Portia. Can't you understand that?" She gave no hint she knew he was there.

He watched her in the massage room, unable to take his eyes off her as the soft, flexible arms stroked her flesh, and he said softly, "You say I spoiled everything, but I'd like you to think about that. On Ostarpa you'd have to go to work right away, be given your duty number just like you had on Earth. On the ship you've got nine years to play with, nine years of carefree life. You can do what you want and nobody's going to say or do a thing to tell you to stop, have you thought of that?" The moving arms were silent and smooth and so was Portia.

He followed her to the bath but could not bring himself to enter there. He stayed beyond the filmy curtain and talked to her. "Sure, I know it was a surprise, awakening you like that, and I know you had in mind waking on Ostarpa, but being on the ship, the two of us, with all our wants taken care of—it has its advantages."

And in the bar, with her eyes averted, drinking with her, he explained, "Oh, I'll admit there are records to keep. But I missed a few days after Karen died. Taking the whole ten years into account, that won't make much difference. But suppose I became ill for a few days. Somebody's got to be on hand to see I get treatment at the medocenter. That's why you've got to come around, why you've got to start thinking about this thing."

And finally, in the navigation room, he told her, "You can't go on like this. You've got to learn all about this ship. Why, if something happened to me, who'd awaken the sleepers? You will have to do that, Portia. You'd be the only one left. You've just got to be ready to take over, that's all there is to it. And don't think it's too hard. The ship does most of it. Automatic. Just a lever here, a button there. I'll teach you all about it. Even landing the ship. You won't find it hard, once you put your mind to it."

Through it all she remained aloof and unspeaking, a beautiful, silent thing with two accusing orbs for eyes, a lovely mouth with generous lips much given to a look of disdain.

Until one day.

IT WAS totally unexpected. Portia had taken over Karen's bedroom next to his, closing and locking the intervening door as if forever. He had gone to sleep in his room, with her still distant and uncommunicative in hers.

He awakened to the smell of coffee and a cooking breakfast. He sat up quickly, wondering if Karen's death and the events that followed it had been a bad dream, and when he assured himself they had not, wondering if he had at last lost his mind.

Clifton quickly dressed and entered the kitchen.

Portia was there.

She smiled at him.

She said, "Good morning, Clifton." Just like Karen.

He stood speechless, staring.

"Breakfast is about ready."

"Wh—what's come over you?" he said numbly, both pleased and dumbfounded, his eyes relishing the lovely figure in one of Karen's sheerest nightgowns.

"You were right," she said, tossing her head to bring the blonde hair away from her face and smiling. Her teeth were every bit as even and white as Karen's. "I just realized it. As you said, there are nine years ahead of us. I might as well make the best of it."

"I'm glad," he said warmly, and the memory of what she had been like during the days before was eclipsed by what she was now. "I was hoping you'd come around."

"Come, sit down," she said, indicating the place set for him, the gleaming silver, the neat napkin, the steaming coffee in the cup. "Don't let it get cold."

"Karen used to say that." And then he thought: That's a mistake; I mustn't mention Karen ever again. But Portia seemed not to have noticed. And she seemed so much like her now.

"I got tired of eating by myself," Portia said, sitting opposite him at the table. And she stole a sly look as she said, "And I'm afraid I acted badly."

"Not at all," Clifton said gallantly. "I understand how you felt. It's just taken a little time, that's all." He started eating, but his eyes were on her and the transformation of eyes that were no longer cold, lips that weren't scornful any more.

"Pity the poor sleepers," she said, laughing. "They can't enjoy a breakfast like this."

"Do you suppose," he said,

endeavoring to keep the talk in the same vein, "that any might rise up when they smell that coffee?" He inhaled ecstatically. "Hmm. There's nothing like it."

"I hope I never make it that strong." And she giggled.

With a shock he found his knee touching hers. He drew away, wondering if it had been accidental. Later, when he tried to kiss her, she turned away, murmuring, "Not yet, Cliff. Give me time. It's so—so sudden."

He obeyed, turned his attention to other things. He could afford to wait. After all, there were nine years. A day or so—what did it matter?

It was more than a week before he managed to kiss her for the first time. And then it was nothing like Karen's kisses. But immediately he felt he was asking too much of Portia too soon. There'd be time for teaching.

They lost themselves in the intricacies of the ship, covering its complete operation, the records that had to be kept, the functions of each section, the matter of awakening the sleepers—which, Clifton explained, was quite simple, since the medocenter did most of the work, but still demanded certain procedures and precautions and delicate adjustments. He even taught her how to use the communications system that would become operable within a few months of Ostarpa. In all, they spent a good two months studying together every facet of the ship.

"It's so complicated," she said in an awed voice. She squeezed his hand she had taken to holding. "But you're an awfully good teacher, Cliff."

"And you're the loveliest student I ever had," he said, squeezing back and drawing closer to kiss her.

"Cliff!" she said, drawing away and giggling. "You're always joking. I'll bet I'm the only student you ever had."

"Well," he said lamely, "I hate to admit it, but you are."

And then they both laughed.

AT LENGTH they finished everything he could show her on the ship. Then he brought up what had been on his mind ever since the day he awakened her.

"Portia," he said gravely, "I'm captain of this ship and as such I have invested in me the power to perform marriage."

Portia laughed. "You're

always saying things so seriously, Cliff. So—so pontifically. Is that the word?"

"I'm serious, Portia."

"I know." She laughed a little more, then straightened her face. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"You're always laughing at me. Why?"

"I don't mean to."

"I want to marry you, Portia."

"I know." And instantly her eyes were grave. "I've known for a long time."

"I've wanted you since the day you first looked at me."

"I've known that, too."

"It was all I could do to—"

"You've been more than kind, Cliff."

"When, darling? When can I marry you?"

She looked up. "Tomorrow?"

His heart leaped. "Marry you tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Tomorrow."

Was there something odd in her look? He couldn't decide.

When Clifton went to bed that night his heart sang. The years ahead no longer seemed appalling and interminable. How they'd spend them! The sewing room . . . it could always be changed back into a nursery. Portia had shown no interest in sewing, so he'd just store Karen's stuff. Perhaps somebody would find use for it when they landed on Ostarpa. It wasn't unusual for captains and their wives to have a half dozen kids during transit.

He went to sleep with the sound of children's feet echoing about the halls and corridors of the ship. And when he dreamed of the marriage it was, oddly, Karen he was marrying . . .

HE AWAKENED with a start. On this morning there was no welcome aroma of coffee. At first he thought perhaps he was too early. But it was time. Portia was probably so excited she was all off schedule.

Clifton was careful on this morning. He took his bath, toweled himself until his skin tingled, used his deodorant sparingly, gave himself a close shave. The part in his hair was never straighter.

Dressing himself in a clean, pressed suit, he strolled from his bedroom. Portia was not in the kitchen. He walked to her bedroom. The bed had been made. But no Portia.

Where the devil had she gone?

He started walking about the ship, searching first here and then there. Of course not

in stereo. Not on this day. Massage? No. Bath? Not there. Tape? Same.

She was nowhere to be found. Then he recalled the funny look in her face the previous night. It meant *something*.

Suicide? Frantic now, he went to both waste chutes. Neither gave evidence of having been opened. Still...

An hour later he returned, a bewildered and disconsolate man, to his office.

Portia was there.

With her was a man.

He was George Hedstrom.

Clifton could only sink back against the wall and look at the two of them, the Portia he had never seen so radiant, George, a dark, handsome fellow who wore a quizzical look. Clifton was shocked to see they were holding hands.

"Captain," George said in a friendly way, rising his full six feet, "Portia tells me—"

"I'm sorry, Cliff," Portia interrupted hastily. "George is my fiance. We were to be married on Ostarpa, but as long as you—"

Tomorrow, she had said...

The two figures blurred before him, the room reeled and Clifton clutched the doorway for support. Karen, Karen! I've been bewitched... This girl—I thought she was you ...I should have known...

"Let me help you."

Clifton struck out at the dark head of hair, hit it somewhere.

Karen, Karen! Can you hear me?

He stumbled out of the room and down the corridor.

Karen, Karen! Where are you?

He found the ventral waste chute. He was in it, heard the door click behind him. Now they'd never get him out, never take him away from his Karen.

The sides of the chute were closing in. It was hot. But it was cool where Karen was.

"Wait, Karen!" he cried. And as he inched his way down the chute he hoped he wasn't too late, hoped she'd forgive him.

There was the outer door. On the other side was coolness and Karen. Dear, beautiful, lovely Karen. The *real* Karen.

With a surge of joy he held to the smooth sides of the shaft and raised his foot.

He plunged it down unerringly against the door. It burst open with a deadly whoosh of air.

The door clicked closed.

The chute was empty. ∞

by PETER PHILLIPS

VARIETY AGENT

Agents? Give them enough rope, and they'll hang you with it!

Illustrated by SMITH

WHEN THIS EGGHEAD dropped in, I was down to my last penny and my last double from the bottle. He was a perfumed little dandy from his neck down. I ranked him among the odd snakes and odder mice I was seeing then, on account of his cere—cepha—on account of he had the biggest damned head I'd ever seen. Bald and terrible, like a grown-up Humpty-Dumpty.

See this—see that—see the coins slip between my fingers and slide up around my sleeves into the other palm. . . . What a joy and beauty it is to deceive one's fellow-men, young man. I'm not surprised you can't see what I'm saying. I'm saying it in darkness.

I'd just come back from seeing Mussel. He's my agent. I've worked beaches, kid's picnics, Elks, Women's Institutes. Mussel says, Benny, you're not even B. Circuit now, you've got to take what I can get and if you don't like it— And he waves outside to Charing Cross Road, where the has-beens hang around outside the agents' offices trying to cadge the price of a beer from the lucky ones.

And I think of coffee-stalls and Salvation Army lodging-houses and—once, after I lost Binnie and it seemed too much

trouble even to keep a collar on my shirt—playing a harmonica outside pubs.

Me. And once I could keep seven alive and leaping like this — crossover — see — up —round—bounce—hup! Hell. Sorry. It's not that my fingers have gone, or my eyes, but I'm living easy now and I'm not keeping up my practice.

Never neglect your practice, son. Like this—with two — three — four — five — gimme your hat—six—that notebook of yours—seven—damn! That fluttering put me off.

While I was shaving, when I was good, I used to one-hand three tablets of soap while I was lathering up.

What? Didn't I tell you I'm talking in darkness, and if you can't see and follow me, you might as well take your bloody notebook and go. I don't need publicity. I'm in good now, thanks to Egghead.

All right. Have another drink. I'm sober. I was drunk when I first saw Egghead. He made me think I was drunker. I was just trying to tell you. He came into my two-by-four just after I'd seen Mussel and was down to my last penny and last drink.

One minute I was there, looking at the bottle, thinking death, desperation and degradation to all agents and par-

ticularly Mussel—parasites, the whole damned boiling lot of them—and next minute, there's Egghead, standing on the worn spot of the carpet.

"Mr. Leete," he says, "your talents," he says, "seem to be unappreciated in this day and age."

Which is precisely what I am thinking, apart from murdering Mussel. But all I can say is, "How the hell did you get in here?"

"What's meet is moot," he says, "and what's meet must stay moot until I can proposition you. How would you like to make a thousand pounds a week, exclusive of tax, for six months?"

This, you must understand, is on top of a foodless but not drinkless day.

"Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall," I sang.

I dislike agents. I dislike pink snakes. This Egghead was not only in the pink snake category, but according to his spiel and my whiskey, he was an agent too.

In a squeaky flow of words and with a great fluttering of tiny hands, he said I was worth a lot of money in the year thirty-thousand seven-hundred and some, so would I kindly like to sign an honest and well-drawn-up contract under which I would be taken from my two-by-four at that precise moment in 1955 to spend six months in the future, and be returned at that precise moment twenty-six thousand pounds richer, with the option of a return engagement.

Would I?

THIS THING had come busting into my home without even a knock. This pink snake, this agent, this drunken freak had come busting into an Englishman's castle and making like a Mussel.

Of course, it was a gag of some kind. I didn't think I had enough enemies or friends left to be interested in such a gag. So I played along with it for a while.

"One day long ago," I told Egghead, "I thought I'd be a second Cinquevalli-cum-Maskelyne. Right now, I'm playing the streets. You can get a hundred better men than me for the trouble of looking up their disengaged ads in Variety. So why me, little pink, eggheaded snake?"

"The others are sober," he said. "They wouldn't believe me."

"I'm sober," I said.

"Never, not in the way I mean," he said.

And he goes on to tell how

machines have taken over so many things where he comes from that people can't think with their hands any more, that their reflexes—eye—hand—brain—have atrophied, and even a bum juggler and conjuror like me would go over big and pull in the crowds.

"And what," I asked him, "is your cut?"

At that, his little white face under the egghead twisted-in on itself, and his little V-lips pursed up and he looked like a prissy spinster with a big white picture-hat on, and he said, "I hardly think you're in a position to question that, Mr. Leete."

"Like hell," I said, and boiled over. "Take that damfool carnival head off and go tell the fellers who hired you that I don't want to play. I'm tired. My drunk is wearing off. And this is not funny any more."

"But," said Egghead, "don't you want to see the future?"

"If you are a specimen from it," I said, "which I doubt," I said, "no," I said. And since it was easier to walk out on him than get him to leave me alone, I brushed past him, opened the door of my two-by-four and went out to get me another bottle.

What's that? Yes, I did say I was down to my last penny. You can keep this out of your little notebook. My fingers were still in good shape. It wasn't regular, understand. Two, maybe three times before. But he was fair game. I dipped him as I brushed by.

But old Nat, who has always been kindly-disposed to my departures from grace in the past, looks at the turnip-watch I dipped from Egghead's pocket and says it's not a watch and even if it was, he wouldn't give me twopence for it.

"Uniquity, iniquity. I say nixity or find myself in the nickity," he said. "Sorry, Benny."

So I walked home by the Thames Embankment, swearing at the dirty red depressing sun which kept trying to squeeze through the smog and wash itself in the river. When I got home, I tiptoed up the stairs in case the landlady should hear me and ask questions about the rent. I had in mind that I could maybe flog the carpet with a hole in it for enough to dull my sensibilities.

Egghead was still there.

His head looked whiter and bigger than ever. He was jerking about on his pipe-stem legs and waving his pipe-stem arms and working his little white face like a cheap puppet.

"My sighkron," he squeaked, "my sighkron, my sighkron my sighkron—what have you done with it, you filthy little pickpocket?"

Which welcome didn't predispose me to liking little Pink-snake-egghead any more. I got on my bed.

"Flit off," I said, feeling very very nasty. "I'm quite sober now, so I can't see you any more."

"My sighkron," he said, jerking and perking around the hole in the carpet like a ballet-dancer with the shakes. "You must have taken it, you smelly barbarian. Return it immediately!"

I was getting tired. I couldn't see this Egghead turning me in. And anyway I didn't give a puce damn.

"If you mean your turnip-watch—"

"My sighkron!" he wailed. "Without it, I must stay in this hell-conceived era of time for the rest of my natural existence."

There were no witnesses, so I said: "Look, chum. I took it, tried to put it in hock. Not a bite. So no money, no whiskey, no turnip-watch. I heaved it into Old Father Thames somewhere between Blackfriars Bridge and Vauxhall Bridge. Go take a two-mile stroll on the bottom of the river."

I was getting one or two ideas about Egghead. I wanted his reaction.

He came and sat on the edge of my bed. Or, shall we say, he staggered over and flopped.

"This sighkron," he said—and I'm quoting—"is my sole link along the entropic barb with my own time. I should not have stolen it. By stealing it in turn, you have become the instrument of a most unpoetic justice. This, I do not deserve,"—and he spread his arms to take in my two-by-four, the carpet with a hole in it and the smoggy view from the window on that November day, with the yellow lights of buses crawling over the river bridges in the distance.

By now I was sober enough to realize that this Egghead was really real. From the future? I didn't care. But if he had to stay around, he could earn his keep and much more.

My percentage would equal the much more.

"That head, those arms and legs—they don't unscrew?" I asked, sitting up on the bed and taking a real interest in something for the first time in years.

"Pinch me, barbarian," he sighed. "You're my nightmare."

I pinched the lobe of one of the ears on that great hairless

head. He squeaked. Neither of us was dreaming.

The how and the why and the wherefore ceased to bother me as from then. So did money.

I started thinking up the billing—

HERE IS WHAT YOU WILL BE LIKE IN THIRTY THOUSAND YEARS TIME!

HE'S ALIVE! THE MAN FROM THE FUTURE WITH A TEN-THOUSAND-HORSEPOWER BRAIN!

YOU'VE SEEN HIM IN MAGAZINES AND THE MOVIES. NOW COME AND SEE YOUR GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GRANDSON IN THE FLESH!

YOU'VE SEEN HIM? Biggest draw since the ostrich-necked women. Bigger. And there's no fake. That whole cranium is stuffed just full of the very best quality brain.

And you can keep your Harley Street specialists to yourself. And your historians. Egghead is my property. I don't want him scrambled. Anyway, he wouldn't be much use to scientists or doctors. According to him, he's just an agent in the future. And agents, then, now or any time, don't know a damned thing except how to screw the biggest percentage out of their clients.

I made him sign his own damn contract, with the names reversed and with no time clause. He's mine—until he finds his turnip-watch.

It's Sunday today. His day off. Where is he?

He's tramping up and down in the ooze at the bottom of the river between Blackfriars Bridge and Vauxhall Bridge in a frogman's suit, looking for his time-traveling turnip.

What if he finds it?

I don't think he will. And you can keep this out of your little notebook too, son.

I've still got it. In a safe place.

I hate agents.

∞ ∞ ∞

THE 14TH WORLD SCIENCE-FICTION CONVENTION will not be held at the Hotel Waldorf-Astoria, as announced last issue, but at the Hotel Biltmore, right across the street from INFINITY's offices in New York City. Guest of honor: Arthur C. Clarke. Planning to attend: everybody who is anybody in the s-f world. Send your $2.00 registration fee now to P. O. Box 272, Radio City Station, New York 19, N. Y.

Human beings have some things even the biggest and best computers don't—hunches, for example!

by JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by ENGLE

SPONGE DIVE

I KNOW it sounds funny when I say that Civilian Intelligence Group has traditions to uphold. After all, the outfit isn't very old; it had been going less than ten years when I first began feeling this way about it.

But it's a curious thing about service organizations, whether they're privately owned or run by a government, that they can take on this aura of having proud traditions in ten minutes of life—*if* they do something that's of real use to somebody, and that has to be done right or not at all. The Foreign Service, for example; or

one of the privately-controlled national health foundations.

Contrariwise, a service organization that actually does nobody any good, except its proprietors, can live for a century without developing a tradition with more meaning than the established time for lunch hour. For example, before coming to CIG I was director of research for what we were told was the oldest advertising agency in the business. The owners *talked* about service, and professionalism, and loyalty, and codes of practice, on the average of one meeting a week; and *still* the turnover there was phenomenal, with two years making you an old-timer. If you stayed there through a third year, you were practically a founder; they allowed you to buy stock. This, mind you, for the agency that was rumored to have engineered the Spanish-American War.

I first broached this notion to Joan Hadamard, our titular social sciences division chief—by "titular" I don't mean that that's not what she is, but that she is actually a great deal more than that —at the beginning of the zirconium affair, and got a healthy snort for my pains. I should have expected it. Joan is an extremely tough-minded, no-nonsense type, about as far from the woolly sociologist as can possibly be imagined, and with all the visible sentiment of a full-grown ocelot.

"I'll settle for balanced books," she said. "That's what it all comes out to in the end. That's why captains go down with their ships; so the owners can prove to the underwriters that the property was occupied when destroyed, and collect the insurance."

"I don't know why I ever listen to you. There's another cherished legend gone up the flue. But Joan, in this case we've got a client to consider, and not any ordinary client, either. This thing first came to us from Althor Magnum. The firm is a member of Affiliated Enterprises — one of the very first. I think we ought to make giving them satisfaction the prime aim."

"Not," Joan said, "at the price of going into the red. We don't have to jump for a client just because he belongs to Affiliated Enterprises, Peter. Al Magnum wouldn't put it up to the board if we refused him. He knows he'd be licked."

I accepted this as gospel, because I knew it was. Joan's knowledge of how people and

social groups behave emerges from a fundamental difference in her approach. Where other people in her field collect data and construct relations from them, she postulates relations first, derives or predicts behavior from them, and then matches the derivations against the actual actions of people to check them. In other words, she's a disciple of Rashevsky—and she never misses.

Nevertheless, I felt stubborn. I thought I had my reasons. CIG had first come into being because an assorted group of industries and universities—now Affiliated Enterprises, Inc., of which CIG is a wholly-owned subsidiary—had wanted to buy an ULTIMAC. That is, *the* ULTIMAC, for no other such computer has ever been built; its limits are unknown, and Clark Cheyney, our mathematics chief (and business manager, incidentally), predicts that we'll never find out what they are. Althor B. Magnum, Inc., one of the country's major industrial research organizations, had been one of those original founders.

IT WAS Magnum in person who brought the problem to us, and it was a nasty one. "Somebody," he'd said, "is buying all the sponge zirconium in the open market, except for the pure stuff. It's impossible, because every pound of the metal is monitored by the Department of Commerce; it's a critical material. But it's happening. I can't buy any, not even the technical grade, and it's hitting me right where I live. I've got a contract to build a brand new type of research reactor—the design is revolutionary, as I'll show you if you're interested—and all I get from Commerce is, 'So sorry, there's no unallocated zirconium left'."

I had to confess that I didn't know what the stuff was good for. Magnum, who began his business career as a chemist specializing in organoleptics, knows that nobody knows everything; he didn't mind explaining.

"It's like this, Pete. This stuff used to be scarce, and nothing more than a curiosity. There was only one way of producing it, and that was expensive, and yielded only a few pounds at a time. Then the Bureau of Standards got interested, because it makes a strong structural material, with a melting-point way higher than steel, and has no appetite for neutrons at all;

that makes it good for constructing nuclear reactors. So Standards worked out a method for turning it out in big batches, by a modification of the process used to produce sponge titanium. All clear so far?"

I had said it was.

"Well, the old method of producing it still has a market, because it yields the pure element, and some people still want that. Usually zirconium occurs in the same ore with hafnium, which is so much like it chemically that they're hell to separate. But for my purposes the Bureau-process product is plenty good enough, and it shouldn't be scarce now. Not any more. I want CIG to find out where it's all going, and cut me a slice."

"Doesn't sound hard," I'd told him. "Of course I can't say right now whether or not we'll take the job. We'll run an assessment on it right away."

"I know," he'd said gloomily. "Sometimes I wonder why I ever sank a dime in this outfit. You've given me three 'noes' in succession this past year."

"It's the budegt," I'd explained. "Must of the fund went into ULTIMAC—you know that. We have to make sure that the fee on a job is commensurate with the costs, or we'll have the trustees on our necks, you included. But I don't think there'll be any trouble on this one. It sounds to me as though the government should be interested; as a matter of fact, they should be raising hell, if they're losing track of anything on the critical list. And their fee on top of yours ought to cover any possible investigation for us, very nicely."

With which off-the-cuff opinion, I put my Size Nine foot in my mouth twice in a single speech. Oh, the government was interested, sure enough. But it turned out that there were *two* possible investigations for us to tackle. One would be cheap and easy, and the government would pay for it, but it wouldn't put a pound of zirconium in Magnum's hands, at least for an indefinite period. The other would unravel the whole affair, get metal to Magnum within the year, would cost ten times what Magnum could afford to pay —and the government wasn't even vaguely interested in that one.

I must confess that I was more than a little appalled when we fed the facts into ULTIMAC—including the fig-

ures which Magnum had supplied us on his proposed research reactor—and got back the twin answers. Zirconium in large quantities, the computer reasoned, is at present useful only for reactors. Anyone buying the metal in the limited quantities available on the open market—as opposed to someone being allocated relatively unlimited amounts by his government—could be building (a) one or two huge reactors, or (b) a flock of small ones. The huge reactors predicted would be highly inefficient at any possible job a reactor might be called upon to do, at the present state of the art. Ergo, small reactors were involved.

Small reactors are bombs.

Q. E. D.

So, SOMEBODY was buying U. S. zirconium to make atom bombs. By the time I had gotten this far into the protocol the computer had handed me, I was feeling pretty complacent about the chances that the government would pay us a fat fee for Magnum's project.

"It is unlikely that the purchasers of the metal are building these weapons inside the continental United States, the probability being below our significant level by the chi-square test," the protocol went on. (ULTIMAC's style isn't set for drama, only for c o n t e n t.) "The immediate buyer(s) in the U n i t e d States, therefore, ship(s) the material elsewhere. This phase of the operation could be terminated by finding out what operations in the government itself make the buying possible.

"After this problem is solved, the significant probabilities are that the purchased material is leaving the country disguised as sponge platinum, which it resembles and which is a normal item of commerce, regularly exported by the U. S. The market for sponge platinum may be classified into two categories: (1) the chemical catalyst market, and (2) the jewelry market. Category 1 involves the largest potential area of search, embracing all industrialized countries; but it may be effectively ruled out of the problem, since in this category platinum itself is a subcritical material and its shipment is already policed by the government. In category 2, the two high probabilities are the Netherlands and the Scandinavian Peninsula, with the latter again of lower probability, since it also falls in category 1. Thus recovery of

the material is most likely to be obtained through the Dutch jewelry bourse."

And there it was. We had then proposed to the government, not with much hope, that it pay for a fishing expedition abroad, and gotten a flat No. All the government wanted us to do was shut off the pipeline; it wasn't interested in recovering unallocated metal. It was at this point that I tried to make my point about CIG tradition, with the resounding success reported above.

But, also as reported, I was stubborn. I knew better than to try to maneuver Joan into anything. She knows all the mechanisms ever invented for doing that, and two more besides. My only chance was to come up with something that had genuine validity, in her eyes *and* in the "eyes" of the machine.

Naturally I started with the machine, in the hope of getting more data. The data I got made me feel the ship going down around me with even greater celerity than before. It appeared that what ULTIMAC had meant by "the Dutch jewelry bourse" wasn't in Amsterdam, but in two other places entirely. For various reasons, chiefly Holland's past fate in various European wars and her likeliest fate if another war broke out in the future, the Dutch gemstone and jewelry craftsmen and traders had relocated in large numbers in Sao Paulo, where gems are as common as perfume is in Paris. A still greater number had gone to South Africa, right to the edges of the mines, so to speak. So the search became a matter of going to Amsterdam and finding out who was receiving the zirconium there, then following it to wherever they were shipping it to. It would be incredibly expensive.

Then we got the money.

"I don't think I understand this," I told Clark Cheyney. "You mean we've been forbidden to undertake the big job, but given the money for it? Or, contrariwise, that we've been authorized to do the little job, and given a hundred-fold too large an appropriation for it?"

"Both," Cheyney said in his slow bank-president's voice. "It's obviously a clerical error. Some clerk processing our two proposals has attached the estimates of each one to the protocols of the other. Now that the small search has been okayed, the big checks are coming in, regular as clockwork."

"Well, what are we going

to do? Got any ideas, Joan? Shall we undertake the big job, now that the money is here?"

"We don't dare," Joan said. "Sooner or later the accounting department up at Commerce is going to discover the mistake—bear in mind that Commerce isn't authorized to issue a nickel for any foreign operation. At that point, the checks will begin to bounce."

"And whoever's doing the job would be stranded," I agreed glumly. "Well, we can always go ahead and do what we've been authorized to do, and return the rest of the money."

"Wasteful," Clark said gravely. "If there is more money available than what we need, more will be spent."

"If we keep a close eye on it—"

"More'll be spent anyhow," Joan said. "Even with the tightest bookkeeping, the mere knowledge that the extra money is there will create unconscious waste. Slightly more expensive accommodations, slightly longer cab-rides, a little more equipment than is actually needed to produce a given piece of information . . . it mounts up. And our field operatives have never been trained to pinch pennies. Sure they don't pad their expense accounts—at least not beyond expectation—but they're never supposed to be niggardly. It won't do."

"We'll be asked to account for overage when the mistake is discovered," Cheyney added. "The only proper thing to do is to return the money back promptly, and resubmit the proposals. Stapled together, I would suggest."

"And do nothing in the meantime?" I said. "Where would that leave Magnum?"

"Nowhere," Joan said. "But Clark's right; it's the only course."

I stood up. "That may well be," I said grimly. "You go ahead and start the red tape unwinding. But somewhere in the world somebody is making bombs out of that zirconium, and we don't know what they plan to do with them. Over here, one of our founders can't fulfill an obligation for want of the stuff—which means because of our inaction. I won't sit still for it. It isn't right."

"What are you going to do?" Cheyney said.

"He's going overseas himself," Joan said. "What are you going to use for money, Peter?"

"I'm going to draw on the general fund," I said. "And keep drawing on it, until eith-

er the problem is solved—or CIG is broke. If you don't want to see CIG broke, Clark, you'd better think up a fourth solution to this financial hassel. But I think this means more to us than money."

Cheyney said nothing, since I was authorized to draw on the general fund and he knew it. But there was actual pain in his eyes.

JOHANNESBURG. I was sitting in a rickety black cafe in the worst slum in South Africa when Roger Balim finally brought me my man. There was a wind-up phonograph on the bar, playing American jazz of a vintage two or three years in the bottle. The Negro diamond miners, filthy and clean, glum and gay, squatted on the floor drinking palm wine; there were very few tables. I had one, but that was only because I had with me the foreman of Pit Six and two other black men of standing in the community. Even so, nobody looked at me with anything but a brooding, resigned suspicion—and not only at me; they looked at my companions that way, too, as though they knew they would never know who would turn his coat next.

Some of the miners were dancing, American style, but without any discrimination as to sex; some of the dancing couples were mixed, some were not. They danced to dance, not as a form of courting. A few danced alone, and one grimy old man had found an open space in which to do a tribal figure he alone remembered, all by himself. He moved his hands as though he were shaking gourds, though they were empty, and his feet stamped out the ancient measures of war or love or medicine . . . all to the tune of "I've Got a Rocket in the Locket in My Pocket (to se-e-end my heart to you)."

The smoke was terrific. The flies didn't seem to mind.

Balim had been my stroke of luck for this leg of the journey: a real, 24-carat heel, the kind of guy from whom you can buy anything, up to and including his grandmother. Of course, he had been a little nervous about it, but in the end, money won. With him, it always would.

Out of moderate pity for CIG's general fund, I had played my hunch right out to the end and gone directly to Johannesburg. My reasoning was fairly air-tight by my standards, though I'd have hated to have known then what ULTIMAC thought of it.

Zirconium may be useful in bombs, but it isn't the ingredient that makes the bomb go bang. For that, you need fissionables. Brazil has a government atomic industry of its own, capable of producing plutonium in quantity; nobody was going to be shipping that much coal to Sao Paulo. South Africa, on the other hand, was still behind most large nations in the nuclear field; but it has gold, and where there is gold there is always some uranium, usually cheek by jowl. Furthermore, despite Apartheid and some even more barbarous customs, the Union is just as industrialized as Brazil is, and has just as much bush where anything, of any size, could be hidden. Somebody there could well be building bombs in secret.

Somebody was. It was easy to find that out, once I was reasonably sure what I was looking for. I found it in the Johannesburg phone book. The Delft Company, Jewelry Brokers. A dead giveaway, for nobody deals in diamonds in Africa but de Beers; nobody sets any jewel but diamonds; and the legitimate cutters, setters and traders, Dutch though most of them are in staff and ownership, do not take Dutch names. The Union is too intensely nationalistic to make such names good business.

A little prying, a little pressure, a little money, and I knew Roger Balim was my man. He was a native Afrikander, white, university-educated, highly skilled in some very recondite branches of engineering which couldn't have anything to do with lapidary work *or* jewelry brokerage. He was one of a number of such men on Delft's staff, but the rest were so close-mouthed that I didn't dare even approach them. Balim was different; I had only to tell him that I knew the "platinum" the firm was signing for from Holland wasn't platinum at all, and he was asking me how much I'd take to keep my mouth shut.

Somebody changed the record on the phonograph. Now it was something pseudo-Hawaiian, complete with seasick steel-guitar glissandoes. The old man looked discombobulated and sat down cross-legged on the floor, where he began to rock with steady, hypnotic dignity. There was a cadaverous dog being sick right next to him, but he didn't seem to notice.

I had asked Balim how much *he* would take to tell me where the zirconium was

being routed out of Johannesburg. He was glad enough to find out that I wanted to bribe, rather than be bribed, but he was scared. He wouldn't tell me directly, but for a price he offered to introduce me to a man who *might* tell me.

There they came across the floor now, Balim looking apprehensively for me. Sure enough, there was another man with him. He was a real shock.

HE WAS a thin Negro, well over six feet tall, clad in a loose white duck suit, and a white shirt open at the collar, from which his wrists and his neck emerged as gauntly as those of a corpse. Though the clothing must have been broilingly hot for him, he gave not the slightest sign that it was uncomfortable; nor did he take any notice of the din, or of the looks that were given him as he followed Balim.

They were peculiar, those looks. Forgive me, but Christ dragging the cross to Gethsemane must have been looked at like that by the poor in the crowd. And there was indeed something very messiah-like about his expression: as fierce as that of a condor, yet withdrawn, suffering, patient, distant. He had high cheekbones which stood out cruelly against his taut skin, and his eyes glittered. I don't ever remember seeing him blink, though of course he must have; everyone's eyeballs have to be lubricated sometimes, or sight goes. I don't think he was a Bantu; the notion crossed my mind that he must have come from one of the nomad tribes that roam the deserts on the borders of Upper Kenya, but perhaps I was only being reminded of John the Baptist.

"Here's the man I was telling you about," Balim said to me, with an odd gesture. I think he was trying to warn me to be circumspect. If so, he was going to get a nasty shock. "This is Piara Singh. This is Mr. Bellows, from America."

Singh sat down directly, and lifted his hand to each of my three companions. Had I not known that Singh was coming, I could never have had them with me at all, and hence could never have gotten into the cafe; Balim had arranged that, too. They rose ceremonially, but Singh gestured them down again.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Bellows," he said in excellent English, looking at me with those gleaming, intense eyes.

"Yes. I'm very grateful to you for coming. But my name is not Bellows; it's Harris, Dr. Peter Harris. Mr. Bellows was only a convenience."

"You are honest," Singh said, staring at me from under the prominent ridges of his eyebrows. And I believed him; I knew that somebody had looked right into me, and what he had said thereafter was a statement of fact. "Piara Singh is also a convenience. It is as common a Hindu name as John Smith is an American; its truth is only that my faith is Hindu. But I cannot be honest with you further, for I must maintain the fiction."

"This is honorable," I said. I was treading very lightly. I had only an inkling of what I was dealing with, but I knew that with this man nothing would do but the ultimate courtesy of believing every word he said. "I'm here because I think I can do you a service, and do myself a service too. You are buying metal from Mr. Balim here. I know why you want it. You are probably paying too much for it."

"Now, wait a minute," Balim said, flushing.

Singh said, "I know that. We can get it no other way. This is not the service Dr. Harris wishes to do me, Roger."

He frightened me; he saw things. "No, it isn't," I said. "I'm only sorry that it has to be so. But the service is this: you will not win what you want with these weapons you are building."

"Ah," Singh said. He looked at me quite a long time. Then he said, "That also is true. But I do not see why. Please explain it to me."

"Wait a minute," Balim said again. "Harris, what's the reason for the phony name? What kind of game are you playing? I thought you wanted the metal yourself, and would pay for it. You'd damn well better not mix into something you don't understand."

"I'm from Civilian Intelligence Group, Balim," I told him. "We have a reputation. Are you sure you understand what that means, or hadn't you better shut up?"

Balim did more than shut up. He got up, his face white. Singh reached out a claw-like, sinewy hand and pulled him down again, without the slightest show of effort, although I would guess that he weighed thirty pounds less than Balim.

"Please explain," he said.

"Gladly. But first, please

tell me what your plans are for the bombs. Otherwise I shan't understand the affair well enough to explain it."

"We will drop a few in Johannesburg," Singh said. "For the effect. It has been planned for a long time, but we did not expect to be able to use these new bombs; that was lucky for us, getting them. If a few do not serve, we will drop more, all on the government buildings, until the government will abandon the Apartheid policy."

His fingertip touched my knuckles. It was as though a live wire had dropped there.

"That is the beginning," he said. "We are thousands and thousands strong. We have sworn that we will have our own country back. We have sworn both the earth oath and the blood oath. We have white men like Mr. Balim to help us with technical matters; we pay them in gold, so we can be sure of them. They have shown us how to build the plant, and make the weapons. We have our own pilots. To get the fuel—and the gold—has cost us many a life already, but we have hordes who will die when we ask them to. Better to die that way, than to die of silicosis, or TB, or kicked to death in the middle of a city street by a policeman. Is that not so?"

"I can't say, because I don't know," I said. "But I know this: these bombs are not what you think they are. Only one of them, even if you drop it only on a government building, will destroy Johannesburg all the way out to here, and beyond. Death for the whole city—and for everything you plan."

Slowly, Singh turned and looked at Balim. I hope no man ever looks at me like that. Balim looked down at the ground.

Evidently Singh did not need to ask him any question, let alone hear any answer. He said to me: "We were not told. We do not seek massacre; that error has already been made. Nor do we want our own people to die at our own hands."

"I know. That's why I tell you what I do."

He was silent a long while. Then he said, "Tell me what we should do."

I had thought about that as intensively as I could, and nothing that had occurred to me was easy. All I can say for my advice is that it was the best I was able to offer. That's not saying very much.

"Give it up," I said. They were the hardest three words I ever spoke in my life. "Vio-

lence isn't the way. As a Hindu, you know that in your heart. A wise man in the West said, 'After the first death, there is no other.' The little bomb and the big bombs you're making are alike: they kill; the numbers of dead don't matter. One is too many. Do it the hard way."

"Everything you say is true," Singh said. He was staring at the murky air far over my head. His voice was that of a man who has just been condemned, and somehow feels his heart breaking with gladness to hear the sentence. I could hardly bear it. "Perhaps I have known it. But the word needed to be spoken."

"I can help a little," I said. I had a frog in my throat. "I'll see to it that Balim's company buys back the zirconium at exactly the price you paid for it. The company will then give it to me, for nothing, because the United States will ask it to, quietly but emphatically. You'll do that, won't you, Roger?"

Balim was sweating dirt. He nodded without looking up.

"I can't dispose of your assembled bombs," I said. "But I can probably negotiate some sort of contract for your refined uranium isotope. My superiors will be interested in anything that will break the virtual monopoly they have up north in the Congo. I know this doesn't begin to cover your losses, but perhaps that's not the major question. If you offer to sell your refining plant to your government at cost, you'll have an explosion worth producing; the story — an all-African atomic power industry created privately, from sheer guts—will go all around the world. Isn't that worthwhile?"

Singh nodded, his eyes still remote, and waited.

"That's all," I said, "I'm sorry. I realize that it isn't very much. But it's all I have to offer."

Singh's eyes came down to me, as though with great effort. For a moment I saw nothing in the world but those tortured black pools. Then his strangely high voice said:

"It is a great gift. You are our brother, Dr. Harris. We have a saying: 'Only the wise have love in their blood.' May it always be so."

And he was gone, and poor dollar-damned Balim with him. I swear that I never saw them go, but there was suddenly no one with me but the three men from Pit Six. They

shook hands with me and we had palm wine all around.

Shipping that zirconium home was going to take CIG's general fund down to minus nothing, but I didn't care. Somebody had put another record on the phonograph. It was "I'd Push a Tank Clear Up Mount Blanc (just for the love of you)." The old man got up and began to pound out his solitary triumph, barefoot, dirty, lonely, and unconquerable. I wanted to dance, myself.

"SINGH is an educated man," I told Joan and Cheyney. "But his education has holes in it, and he can't wipe out his tribal childhood. When I got to the plant, I found that every one of those bombs had a witch-mark on it, smeared on in goats' dung. There was a special compound for the goats, right in the plant, and a spot on the assembly line where the dung was put on. And another compound where they kept black roosters, to supply blood to sprinkle the bombs with just before they were loaded into those old surplus planes."

"The turncoats," Joan said, "were going to let them saturate Johannesburg with the bombs; all the planes would have been lost in the process. Then they were going to betray Singh, and the location of the plant. In the universal horror, people like Balim would get quietly away with the money Singh had paid them."

"It looks that way," I said. "Speaking of money, what do we do now? I did for the general fund, but good. I only got back by flashing my ID card, so I could get tickets on the cuff."

"Oh, that," Cheyney said. "What you did for our standing is much more important, Peter. Especially since the general fund is intact."

"Intact? Impossible — I must have spent—"

"It's quite intact," Cheyney said. "You put us on the spot, Peter. Just as you said at the time, we *had* to think up a fourth way out. There was only one other way, and Joan used it."

"What on Earth was it?"

"I took it straight to the White House," Joan said composedly. "And I scared the old man green."

After I had taken it in, I saw the amusement in her cool gray eyes. I began to laugh myself.

"Bro*ther*," I said. "I'll bet you did."

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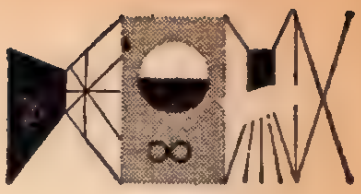
Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

In each issue, Mr. Knight will review a new book which he considers unique enough for special consideration.

NO BOUNDARIES, by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore. Ballantine, 35¢.

When Henry Kuttner married Catherine Moore in 1940, two seemingly discordant talents merged. Kuttner's previous stories had been superficial and clever, well constructed but without much content or conviction; Moore had written moody fantasies, compelling but a little thin. In the 40's, working together, they began to turn out stories in which the practical solidity of Kuttner's plots seemed to provide a vessel for Moore's poetic imagination. Probably the truth is a good deal more complex; the Kuttners themselves say they do not know any longer which of them wrote what; at any rate, the two elements still seem to be present, and separable, in their work.

No Boundaries gives only a taste of this blending: of the five stories, I take one ("Vintage Season") to be almost entirely C. L. Moore's, and two ("The Devil We Know" and "Exit the Professor") to be equally pure Kuttner.

To dispose of these first: "Vintage Season" is the hauntingly memorable story, from *Astounding*, about the brief visit of a group of cruel pleasure-seekers from the future, which fairly drips with a blend of love, luxury and fear — a specific emotional color, so intense that you can almost taste it. The story is a rounded whole, complete and perfect in itself, except for a rather awkwardly prolonged ending. In an unfolding puzzle story like this one, the argument and the physical action ought to come to

a point at once, like the intersection of a fist and a chin.

"The Devil We Know" is a deplorable pot-boiler from *Unknown,* with one paragraph of good writing in it (the description of the demon on p. 55) ; the rest is bromides and desperation. "Exit the Professor" is one of the funniest of the unfailingly funny Hogben series; these, I have said before, belong in a book of their own.

The two remaining stories, "Home There's No Returning" and "Two-Handed Engine" are recent ones; the latter was published in *F&SF* for August, 1955, the former appears for the first time in this book. Both are about robots, a subject which has intrigued the Kuttners separately before.

Here it's no longer possible even to guess what part is Kuttner's and what Moore's: the hypnotically deft treatment of Deirdre's robot body in "No Woman Born" is so very clearly echoed in these stories, along with the ingenious improvisation of ENIAC in "The Ego Machine." The result is a series of brilliant and penetrating images, in which the robot, that clanking servitor of hack writers, becomes a vehicle for allegory and symbol. The blunt weapon suddenly has a point so sharp and fine that it tickles you at the heart before you know you have been touched.

"Home There's No Returning" deals with the robot as saviour, and has a stiff little moral at the end; "Two-Handed Engine" deals with the robot as destroyer—the Fury of Greek myth, who pursues a malefactor to his doom. Which of the two stories you like better probably depends partly on the meaning these symbols have for you, and partly on how far the emotional experience succeeds in distracting you from the details of the plotting. Stripped of their elaborations, both plots are banal; the sociological backgrounds are no better than they should be, and the other sciences are worse; in one, the physical action of the story is so arbitrarily arranged as to be flatly incredible. Yet these are stories you won't soon forget: probably because science fiction is so full of stories in which the technical data are correct and soundly handled, but the people are so many zero-eyed integers—as blank-faced, but not a hundredth part as meaningful, as the Kuttners' shining robots.

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"THE STAR" by Arthur C. Clarke was by all odds the most popular story in the first issue of INFINITY, *and probably one of the most popular science-fiction stories to be published anywhere in 1955. It was also highly controversial, and in "Rebuttal" Betsy Curtis presents the other side of the question—plus an idea that seems to be totally new. The result, we think you'll agree, is one of the outstanding science-fictional events of 1956.*

Rebuttal

by BETSY CURTIS

Immortality? Like anything else, it may be a matter of definition, or just of the point of view . . .

Illustrated by GIUNTA

THEY BROUGHT Father Phillip Burt to St. Luke's as our "share" of the research project on the mysterious disease which afflicted most of the crew of the recently returned Phoenix Nebula expedition. News of the disease, of course, was not spread beyond the research teams, as the public seems to fear a plague worse than damnation itself. And it didn't seem to be a very serious disease: Father Phillip was easily the worst case of all; and although several members of

the expedition had died, their deaths could be evaluated as due to secondary infections of common enough earth origin. Very few of the crew members were in actual pain; but Father Phillip was in constant agony which no amount of sedation seemed to calm.

I ran the customary tissue cultures and biopsies, including those on internal organs not customarily available. We were given an excuse for getting internal samples of tissue when Father Phillip's appendix flamed into infection. And although I did not find a general infecting organism, what I did find was enough to send me trotting up to his room on the double.

I suppose I should explain here that I, Father Niccolo Molina, am head research pathologist for St. Luke's and that I don't, therefore, meet the patients personally very often. But Father Phillip I had to meet.

His day nurse, Sister Mary Felicia, met me at the door in her crisp white teflon overall.

"Father is very uncomfortable today," she told me. "The incision is not healing at all and he keeps trying to talk and then breaking off in the middle of a sentence with the pain."

"Talking about anything in particular?" I asked suspiciously.

"The merest chit-chat. The w e a t h e r . . . pleasantries about the hospital . . . jokes about doctors in particular. He doesn't have a very high regard for doctors, it seems. Thinks they are notable atheists, I gather." She smiled.

"Many thanks for the diagnosis, Sister," I told her gravely. Then I added, "I suppose you are having to maintain a considerable quarantine and decontamination routine as Father's nurse?"

"Oh yes. In this wing, you know, we are all in solitary, approaching no persons other than our patient and the doctors . . . sometimes for as much as three months after the end of a case. It provides excellent time for a retreat, which is why most of us apply for such duty." She pointed to the small *prie-dieu* in her tiny cubicle, which stood as a buffer between the contagion room and the hallway of the ward.

"If I am right about the nature of Father Burt's disease," I told her, "you will soon see the end of this case, and without any three m o n t h s' decontamination, either."

She smiled again. "You couldn't say a happier thing," she said, "even though I shall probably apply for a leprosy case if I am relieved of this one. I've become very concerned about Father Phillip."

"Good. He needs your prayers as no man probably ever needed them before. I'll see him now." I crossed her small room and opened the inner door and went in.

FATHER PHILLIP was lying flat in the narrow white bed, his arms lying listlessly on either side of the slight hump of his body under the sheet. The big bulge halfway down was his knees over a pillow, the usual position for post-operative appendectomies.

He squeezed out a smile with an effort. "Morning, doctor," he said.

"Father Nick," I smiled back. "Father Nick Molina of Pathology, Father."

His wasted body jerked as if with a knife thrust. Then he said, "Excuse me. I had forgotten that there were doctors who were not laymen. I'm sorry." He drew up a shoulder against his cheek in a curious gesture, then shivered.

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Just sorry, I guess . . ." He winced and was silent.

"Sorry for me?"

"Well, yes."

"That I'm not a layman?"

"You could put it that way."

"That's a very interesting statement, Father, and one about which I want to know a good deal more after I've asked you some other questions. You see, I think I know what's the matter with you, and it's definitely curable."

"It is not curable." His voice had a flat finality, and his lips drew into a thin firm line.

"Let me ask you the questions anyway, Father," I said. He gave no other sign. "Have you ever looked through a microscope?"

"At the little beasties? Yes, in college."

"Well, that's what I have just finished doing with a number of slivers of living tissue from your body. Do you know what I saw that would bring me up here?"

"I might," he answered warily.

"What do you think?"

"Cancer, maybe."

"No, cancer cells have their own pattern of behavior which is very pretty and, of course, no longer at all deadly. You do not have cancer; but the cells of your kidneys, for instance, are doing some-

thing I've never seen live kidney cells doing."

"And what is that?" he said, as if he really couldn't care less.

"Nothing in particular. This is unheard of indeed. Kidney cells are busy little widgets doing a tremendous job night and day. Like the individual muscle fibers of the heart, they work on year after year with no vacations, no coffee breaks, secure in the knowledge of their purpose."

"No pseudo-sermons, please, Father!" Father Phillip's voice was stern. "You don't have to Peter Rabbit up biology for me."

"A scholar indeed to have heard of Peter Rabbit," I laughed, but he did not smile. Then I asked, "Do you want to see how real kidney cells—yours—are behaving? I have a projecting microscope in the basement. Do you want to see what's going on?"

"Not particularly. If you think you can cure me, go ahead and try."

"Are you willing to pray for your own recovery?"

"No!" He spat out the word with a ferocity that seemed to surprise even himself.

"Then I am going to sermonize indeed. And you are going to listen, my dear little kidney cell."

"Oh, go ahead. But I warn you that I know something that will cancel it all in advance." He had developed more force of personality than he had showed since I came in.

"Oh? Then suppose you tell me about that. I always do better in rebuttal."

AND HE blurted it out . . . the whole story of the Phoenix Nebula expedition and its discovery of the memorials of that beautiful race which was destroyed utterly in the explosion of its star . . . the supernova which was our own Star of Bethlehem. "So you see," he concluded, "we found out that ultimate dreadful secret of the cosmos, that there is no plan, no purpose, no good God who watches the fall of the sparrows with tender concern. To whom could I pray for my recovery? To the random spin of electrons or planets? To a petty tribal totem? To nothing!"

"*We* found out? You *and* the crew?"

"I gave them what answers I could."

"They asked *you* . . . and for a fish you gave them a stone, is that it?"

"Scold away," he said tonelessly. "I would not lie to them."

"The poet Dante . . ." I began.

"Spare me the poets," he said bitterly.

"The poet Dante," I repeated firmly, "in his recounting of the vision of Paradise, came at last to the Outside. He had pressed on just as you of the expedition had pressed on, ever outwards, looking for The Purpose. He was fortunate, of course, in not actually making his expedition physically, in spite of pretending that he did so. Because space seems to be too big for man to make anything of while he's in the flesh. Anyhow, when Dante got Outside, the whole universe did a strange flip-flop. If you can imagine a tennis ball really turning inside-out and every other atom of the universe being compacted at the center and the atoms of the original ball rarefying outwards, you may have his Rosa Mystica. At any rate, you can understand that the further out you go, the more you look at the same thing no matter in which direction you look . . . like every direction being South from the North Pole . . . so you might as well say that you are looking at a Center when you have reached the periphery and look farther out."

"For the purposes of analogy, I suppose?" He was still bitter.

"For the purposes of making it clear what I want you to do. I want you to turn inside out. I want you to be God, so to speak, for a few minutes."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed. For those minutes, at least, you have done with searching for Him further and further out . . . where you must have thought He was (and He is, of course) or you'd probably have been a nuclear physicist or a cytologist like myself. Consider yourself, then, the deity of yourself, your body, of each personality-packed cell within it. Those cells respond more or less well to your purposes and your plans. You love them all and they love you, whether or not they know it very well. Now think back . . . how did you explain it to your baby incisor when it first felt the pushing of a second tooth underneath? That it was expendable? That it was no longer part of your purpose?"

"I don't suppose I felt that I was accountable to my teeth." Grumpily.

"But at any rate, your purposes had not changed, had they?"

"I suppose not."

"Now listen closely, God.

Suppose you actually told your teeth that you didn't need them any more . . . and your heart cells that had been contracting along so bravely . . . and your marrow cells that had been making blood . . . and your stomach and your spleen . . . you told each and every cell that it was probably a good enough cell but that really there was no purpose in their doing anything as you yourself had no purpose and probably didn't exist anyway. Then what?"

"They'd go right on working. What a man tells his cells can't affect them. You know that." Truculently . . . as if to say: *you can't fool me.*

"They would begin to quit right then and there. A man *might* not be able to tell his cells much, but remember, a god can. Now let's go a step further in. Let a cell be God and let its individual molecules be its creatures. And this God tells His creatures that it's all over . . . no more purposes, no more action because there's no reason for it . . . what then?"

"The molecules break down?" Facetiously.

"Exactly. And the atoms disperse and the electron shells fall away and what happens after that, I'm hardly prepared to say."

"Hardly." Amusedly now.

"Now back to man as man, not God, for the next. While you and your eager predecessors were pushing outward to the stars, I and mine were exploring cells. And we found cells dying from simple lack of faith . . . or, you might say, from an excess of faith in purposes which had been abandoned. 'Our God said so and so' they insisted, long after their God had revised his plans to such and such."

"Changeable gods do not interest me." Boredly.

"I'm glad to hear it," I told him. "That's fairly important. The discovery part of this investigation, however, is that man does act as a god to his cells, can tell them things and know that they hear his still small voice. And among other things which man has to say to his cells is his promise of immortality to each and every one."

"That's going too far, I think," Father Phillip objected seriously. "The body dies."

"Man has a Precedent," I said quietly. "But," I added, "you have just told me that it was a number of bodily deaths which destroyed your faith in all pattern and purpose."

"Is that comparable?"

"Not only is it comparable . . . it is, you might say, one

of the myriad identical petals of the Mystic Rose. And it is the one I know something important about. You see, I have witnessed the immortality of the cell. That's *my* contribution to the journals, if not to the instruction of the world which doesn't read them."

"Oh, I know . . . every cell that's alive is merely a daughter cell of one original cell, so that cell is immortal."

"I don't mean that at all, even though that's true. You might say that I mean I have seen the souls of 'dead' cells in heaven."

INCREDULOUSLY: "Through the projecting microscope in the basement?"

"No, you don't see them with eyes or hear them with ears," I assured him.

"I thought not."

"But that doesn't mean they're not there. The first time was in a placenta from the garbage can. We had been culturing polio viruses in human placentas (very interesting personalities viruses are, too) and I'd been sent a whole placenta more than I needed. What can a mother tell a placenta which has been doing its work and is still in excellent shape, just like that civilization in the Phoenix Nebula some two and a half millennia ago? Does she say, 'There's nothing more for you in time or space; the baby is born, I abandon you to utter nothingness'? Very rarely. And even then she doesn't mean it. But the life does go out of the cells. And disperses to God, glorifying Him in no uncertain terms. This is what I heard and saw, with a God-given perception which is not in my eyes and ears."

"You don't mean intuition, surely," he objected disgustedly.

"Let me put it another way with another question. With what ears do you hear the music of the spheres?"

"You are too much the poet. I don't follow you." He was puzzled.

"To be very prosaic, then, how do you sense the 'turnover' or change in energy level of the lone electron of a hydrogen atom in interstellar space?"

"By deduction from whatever type of recording is made from a radiotelescope."

"You have no physical nerve endings to sense this directly?"

"Of course not."

"But you are quite sure, nevertheless, that so gross a creature as man may be aware of so slight an emission of energy?"

"Yes."

"And that what man can be aware of, God is also aware of?"

"It follows, if God is aware at all."

"If there is a God, then, there wouldn't be much chance that He didn't know about such gross creatures as the men of the Phoenix? Excuse me . . . I've gone far afield. You said the radiotelescope. Well, a few other doctors and I have been working on an instrument to measure cellular action currents—in living cells, of course; and I had added an auxiliary component which was supposed to find out what became of certain suspected possible energy emissions not accounted for or required by chemical processes in the cell. Where there's smoke there's fire, you know . . . and where there's energy there's apt to be more energy. And here was a nice piece of fresh dying tissue in beautiful condition.

"I put a tiny sliver into the infrascope just as a young child will put anything that comes his way into his mouth for analysis . . . and I saw the scintillations on the plate which I knew signalled the ascent of the souls of the cells, the binding energies . . . one flash for each dying cell body, calculated later . . . one quantum of binding energy, one soul!"

"And so they were gone . . . done . . . dissipated into your machine . . . souls no longer." Father Phillip's sigh was one of infinite disappointment.

"Binding energy to light . . . light to mass, maybe . . . and mass to energy again . . . or is there anything but energy in the final analysis? You astronomers profess to know something of this. Why is it, then, that when you bump head-on into life you suppose it to be mysteriously something else? Something capable of complete extinction, of contradicting the laws of the universe?

"But I digress again. I am sorry. I have not said what you are waiting to hear."

Father Phillip drew in a long breath.

"In a frenzy of spirit I worked for months to refine the instrument and to make more precise the registering and recording, daily trying various tissues in the original machine . . . getting reacquainted, too, with the personalities of various types of cells in the big projecting mike. Today I can show you, or any interested person, the endurance of personality in the energy quanta after the

cell body is dead. Does this make a difference?"

Father Phillip's sigh this time was a relaxation of his whole being. "Somehow it does," he said, "but I don't know why."

"You know," I assured him, "that the crux of the Phoenix matter was the question of personal immortality. If the souls of the Phoenix folk are in the hand of God, what does it matter to you or to me where their bodies are? Suppose, just before the end, God told them that He would bless their physical passing and set it for a sign to a younger people that their savior was at hand? You have no way of knowing that He did not. You *do* know that He said: 'Other sheep I have which are not of this flock.' And when your own body dies, you may even meet your beloved folk of the Phoenix Nebula and there shall be 'one flock and one Shepherd'."

Father Phillip's hand reached out and I grasped it. He returned the pressure firmly. "Thank you, Father," he said gravely. "I have been in mortal danger of making a mistake. You have been sent to me."

"As you were sent to the crew of the expedition, and have not yet wholly failed them. How do you feel at this moment . . . in your body?"

His look became abstracted and he seemed to be searching himself internally. Then he looked back at me with a shade of a grin. "My incision itches like fury," he said, "and I need the bedpan."

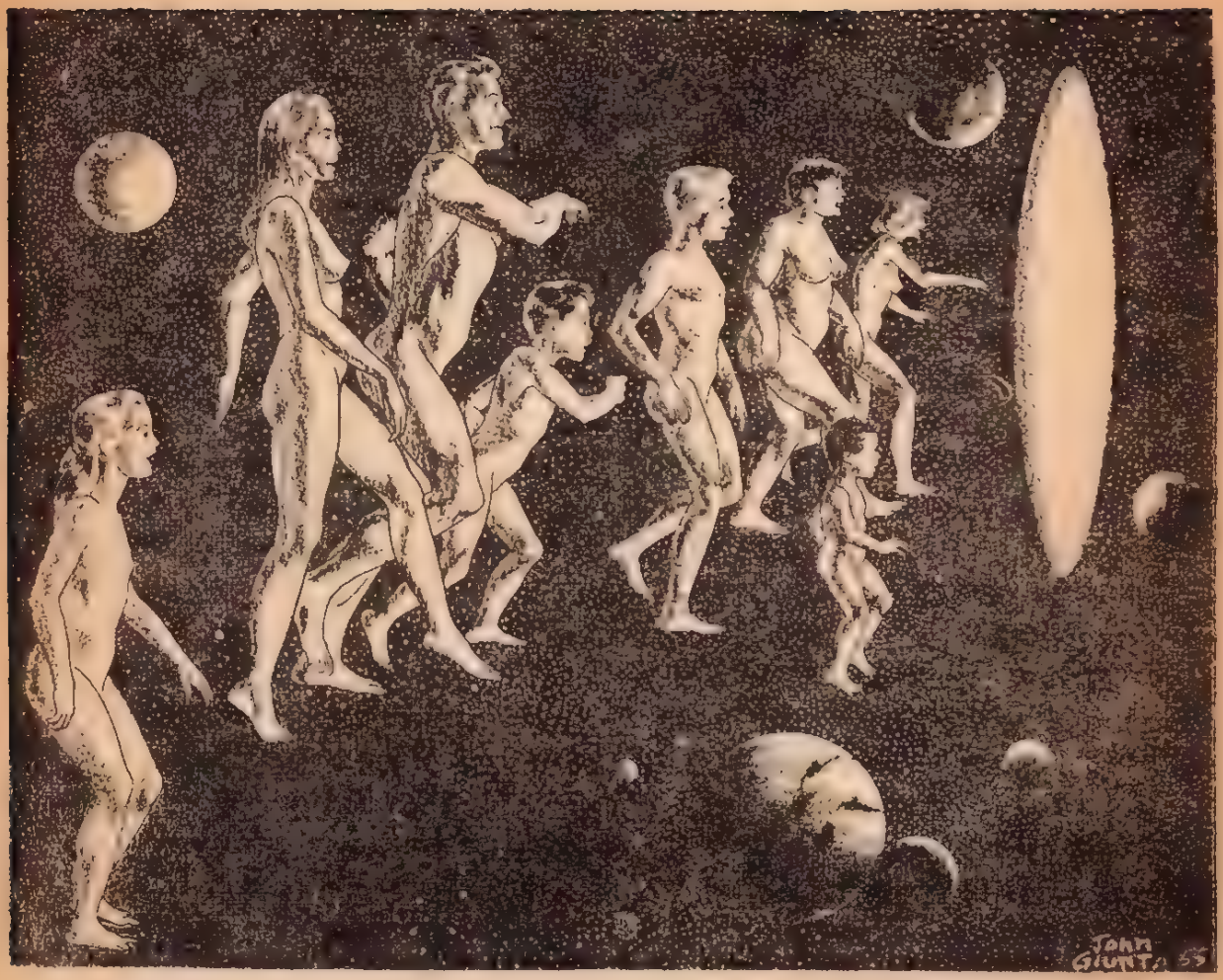
"So, you are healing already? Now try to tell me a man can say nothing to his cells." I drew back the sheet and observed the drying of the serum at the edges of the incision.

"How soon can I get out of here?" he asked eagerly. "I must go to the other members of the crew at once!"

"First to confession," I reminded him. "And then, depending on God's will, it may be weeks or even days. I cannot predict the speed of a miracle."

AND IT was well I did not try. It was a scant ten hours later that the figure of Father Phillip Burt was wheeled in a chair to a waiting ambulance that was to take him to the first of the hospitals where a member of the crew lay in desolate quarantine. His body was still frail, but his smile was of radiant health. He waved to me.

"One flock . . ." he called, and was borne away. ∞



MY WIFE don't believe me. That's why she made me come here, and I don't think you're gonna believe me, either, but it's the God's honest truth—and the money's mine.

Hell, I wouldn't never steal. I know there's a lotta fellas in my fix that do, but not me. I always been honest, and always got along okay.

Excuse me, but are you takin' this down just the way I'm tellin' it? Cuz I can't talk so good, ain't had much schoolin', and I want this took down just like I'm tellin' it, cuz it's gonna be hard enough to believe.

Okay, thanks.

The whole thing started yestiddy mornin'. I went out early cuz my wife was sick and I wanted to try and get as much as I could by myself, in case there's gonna be doctor bills. And it's a lot tougher goin' it

There was madness

in Manhattan when

Queerpants came to town!

by CHESTER COHEN

Round-Up Time

Illustrated by GIUNTA

alone, counta my wife plays the banjo, and that's a big help.

Well, the subway take on the way up from Brooklyn was pretty poor, so I got off at Columbus Circle and headed for the Park. I figgered, it bein' the Fourth of July holiday, there'd be pretty good pickin's there.

But hell, I never figgered it was gonna be *that* good!

I had a little trouble gettin' acrost Fifty-ninth Street—you know, where they been doin' all that diggin'?—and I took a bad spill there. My crutches slipped on that damn gravel they got spread all over the place. I don't usu'ly have trouble navigatin' that way, but this mornin' I was still kinda sleepy and wasn't watchin' myself enough.

Yeah, I went right on my ear—that's how I got this cut here. As if I ain't had enough trouble there.

This real nice guy come runnin' over and helps me up. He talked real funny, sorta with his teeth, like. I couldn't make out a thing he said. A furriner, I figgered.

Then when we get to the curb, he takes off like a bat outta hell into the park. That's when I noticed he was dressed kinda funny, too. Like the creases on his pants was on

the *sides*, and his jacket was on backwards, and he didn't have no shoes on. Just some kinda floppy red socks, it looked like, with a lotta yella tassels on 'em.

Must be a character from the Village, I figgered. I seen a lotta queer ducks down there in my time.

Then I forgot about him, cuz I spotted a coupla young kids sittin' on the stone bench near the gate, and they looked like a good touch. So I dusts off my hat and gives 'em a try.

But they was still lookin' pop-eyed towards the park where the funny character went, and didn't give me a tumble atall. So I moved along into the park, and to hell with 'em.

There was only a coupla bums sleepin' on the benches near the gate, and I went on up the grade and around the bend. It was slow goin' uphill, and my leg was hurtin', but when I fin'ly got there, all the benches on both sides of the walk was empty.

I thought, Hell, I'm *too* early. But I kept on goin', even though my shoulders was startin' to hurt now. I didn't wanna grab a rest till I took in a coupla bucks, at least.

The ground levels off there, and it was easier goin', so I tried to get up a little speed, rememberin' there was a place up ahead where people always sit on the grass and get the sun.

And all the way, the benches was empty and not a soul in sight nowheres. I was thinkin' maybe there was some kinda celebratin' goin' on and I oughta been goin' up towards the Mall. But I knew it was too early for anythin' like that, so I kept on goin'.

And a damn good thing I did. Cuz when I reached that big field—you know, where the road cuts off?—there was a fair-sized crowd standin' around there.

They was all lookin' off towards the middle of the field. But I couldn't make out from where I was what was goin' on, and I didn't care much, anyways, cuz I don't care nothin' 'bout them parades and stuff. So I just started makin' my rounds.

WELL, it was the damndest thing I ever seen! All them people started shellin' out soon as I came up to 'em—without even lookin' at me! I thought I was gonna pass out right there, seein' all them greenbacks floppin' into my hat.

One guy threw in wallet and all!

Lookin' at these crazy people, I seen they was all talkin'.

And they looked like they was talkin' to theirselves, cuz nobody turned a head, just kept starin', all glassy-eyed, like they was doped up.

The old guy that threw in his whole wallet was sayin' somethin' like: "This is the finest performance of scarladdy I've ever heard. Positively brilliant!" There was a skinny kid standin' next to the old gent, and his lips was movin' fast. "Jeepers!" he was sayin', "real dixieland." And his buddy was standin' there, tappin' his feet and yellin', "*Hear* that boogie beat! Man! That's Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson at their best!"

A little ways in, a fat guy, standin' on somebody's panama hat, says, "Show-pan! I just *love* show-pan." His big, flabby lips was slappin' together hard. The big, chesty old lady with him had one o' them little wrinkled-up mouths, and I could hardly make out what she was sayin', cuz her lips didn't hardly move at all when she talked, but it was somethin' like, "Chambah music, my deah. *So* lovely."

Ev'rybody's mouth was goin'—ev'rybody I looked at was sayin' somethin' about music. And they all looked like they was havin' the time of their life.

And they kept right on shellin' out as I moved along through 'em!

Then I gets to the edge of the crowd, and I spot what they're all starin' at—it's nobody but my old friend, Queerpants, the nice guy that helped me on Fifty-ninth Street when I took that spill!

He's standin' out there in the middle o' the field with his back to the crowd, wavin' his arms around like crazy. Looked just like he was leadin' a band. Queerest thing I ever seen—cuz there ain't nothin' in front o' him, exceptin' trees and grass.

A coupla minutes later, he throws his hands down, like he's stoppin' somethin', and then he turns around towards the crowd and bends over real low.

And the crowd goes nuts. Their mouths are wide open, screamin' and yellin', and they're clappin' their hands like they was at a circus or somethin'.

Queerpants bends over a couple times more, then he swings around again, sorta taps the air in front o' him, stretches his arms up over his head for a second, and then starts slingin' 'em around again.

Right away, everybody shuts their traps and goes to

starin' again. They all look like they been cryin'—but happy like.

I'm standin' there, tryin' to figger how maybe it's some kinda gag, and there's maybe a band hidin' back in the trees or somethin' like that, when outa the corner o' my eye I spots this cop comin' towards me.

I ducks back into the crowd real fast and starts stuffin' all the dough into my pockets. Soon's the hat's empty, I takes a peek back through the crowd, and there's the bluecoat, rockin' back on his heels with a big grin spread on his fat face.

This, I hadda see, so I moves over, real quiet like, and his mouth is goin' like sixty. "It's the old Killarney," he's sayin', "Bejasus! Oi've niver heard the like. Me poor old mither should be here now. God *bless* the man!"

And all the time, the crowd's gettin' bigger and bigger. Cars stop along the road, a couple people ride over on horses, two women with baby carriages pushes in, and a big guy with glasses, carryin' about ten books, drops them on the grass and starts clenchin' his fists.

Now I see Queerpants is takin' a bow again, and ev'rybody's beatin' their hands.

All of a sudden, Queerpants jumps around and takes off towards the woods, hoppin' across the grass like a rabbit, and wavin' his arms around again as he goes.

Lucky I'm on the outside, or I woulda been trampled. It was like somebody yelled "Fire!" in a movie. The whole mob beats it across the grass, knockin' into each other, ev'rybody tryin' to get ahead.

I LET 'EM GO and went back to the sidewalk. I know where that woods lets out; it leads right back to Central Park West, and it's the long way around. I can easy beat 'em by goin' up the sidewalk.

And I do. I'm already waitin' outside when Queerpants comes hoppin' out with the whole mob runnin' after him. Looks like they picked up lots more people on the way, cuz now there's hundreds followin' him.

I damn near chokes when Queerpants jumps the red light. But traffic just stops dead for him, brakes jammin' up and down the street for about a mile.

He's headin' straight crosstown towards the river, it looks like, and I'm thinkin', damn, this I gotta see. But I can't figger no way to catch up with 'em.

Then I see the traffic on the other side of the street is startin' to turn right in after the tail-end o' the mob. And the same thing starts on my side, ev'rybody tryin' to go down that side street at the same time. And ev'rybody punchin' their horns like crazy.

About four cars down from where I'm standin', there's a taxi in the line. So, neat as you please, I goes down, opens his door and climbs in.

The cabby don't even see me. In his mirror, I can see his face is red as a beet, and he's yellin' and cussin' and beatin' on his hornbutton.

Well, I pulls the door shut and make myself comfy. Then, all of a sudden, we start movin'. As we cut around the corner, I see how we got our break—there's two cars locked bumpers in the other lane, holdin' up the whole line.

Now we're goin' straight crosstown at a pretty good clip. At Amsterdam, we swing uptown, up a big hill, and when we get to the top, I can see the crowd still racing along like mad.

Way uptown, somewhere near a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, we turn west, run down under the Express Highway, and end up in front of a beat-up old dock.

There's hundreds of cars parked all over the place with their doors open and their engines runnin', and ev'rybody's racin' toward the river.

My driver was out before the cab hardly stopped. It took me a little while to get out. Then I had to be real careful navigatin' that old wharf. It was full of holes and big cracks and piles of junk lyin' around.

Slow goin'. I was pretty beat by the time I reached the mob near the end o' the wharf.

They was two long lines of 'em, movin' along slow. Up ahead, they was all goin' up a big red ramp that went up into the air off the dock and into a great big thing that was hangin' in the air over the river. The thing looked like a big banana made outta glass.

When I got nearer, I could see right into the thing.

Inside it, there was a lotta little stalls, and people was all crowdin' into 'em, about four or five to a stall. As soon as they got in, a kinda door dropped down and I couldn't see no way that they could get out.

But it didn't look like anybody was *tryin'* to get out.

There was a big round table in each stall, with a lotta food on 'em, and the people was standin' around just eatin' like pigs in a sty.

All the time I was watchin', people kept pilin' into the thing, lookin' like they was singin' their heads off. Some was clappin' their hands and throwin' their arms around, like they was doin' some kinda dance.

For about an hour, people kept marchin' up that ramp, until fin'ly the end of the line came, and they all got in—exceptin' the last one. A real skinny old man with a cane.

Just as he got up to the top of the ramp, the hole in the side of the banana closed up, quick as a wink.

All of a sudden, the thing starts to go straight up into the air, leavin' the old man standin' there at the edge of the ramp, wavin' his cane.

Next thing the old man goes over the edge and drops into the river.

The banana-lookin' thing keeps goin' up into the air, goin' faster and faster, and shinin' like a mirror. Smaller and smaller it gets, and then —bop—it's gone.

Goin' back to the street, I was feelin' sick. It was like ev'rybody in the world was crazy except me. I felt *lonesome.*

And all those cars, parked ev'ry which-way, with their doors open and their motors runnin'—it was real scary.

Well, I got outta there as fast as I could go and took the subway home. And my wife wouldn't believe me when she seen all that dough.

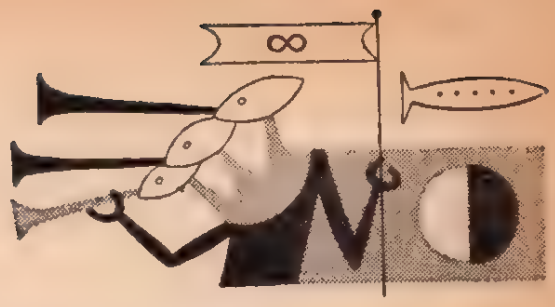
But it's the truth, and I figger the only reason they didn't get me, whoever they was, is because I'm stone-deaf and couldn't hear that guy's funny music.

Do I get to keep the money, Yer Honor?

∞ ∞ ∞

TALES FOR TOMORROW: To give you even a rough idea of how good we think the next issue will be, we'd need several pages —so we'll just present a partial listing of the contents without further comment: "Someday," a compelling and poignantly human story by one of science-fiction's greatest writers, Isaac Asimov; "Stroke of Genius," a novelet that proves excellent science-fictional detective stories *can* be written, by Randall Garrett; "The Big Fix," a novelet loaded with a kind of sheer excitement that is seldom equaled, by Richard Wilson; "Time Out," a completely new twist on time travel, by Damon Knight; plus many others. Enough said?

Fanfare



The Use of Geometry in the Modern Novel

by NORMAN J. CLARKE

Whenever something of suitable quality can be found, INFINITY *will reprint an item from a "fanzine"—one of the amateur journals published as a hobby by the more enthusiastic devotees of science fiction. "The Use of Geometry in the Modern Novel" originally appeared in* Wendigo, *published by Georgina Ellis,* 1428 15*th St. E., Calgary, Alberta, Canada.*

"IF ONE SIDE of a triangle is divided externally into segments which are proportional to the other two sides, the straight line which joins the point of the section to the opposite vertex bisects the angle at the vertex."

These words (I am almost tempted to add, "my dear brethren"), taken from the text of any geometry book are, incredible as it may seem or not, the basis of a plot which is most familiar, excruciatingly common to the rabid reader of the modern novel. As it stands, there is little into which the fanatic reader can sink his dentures or the sharp fangs of his mind, but a truly skillful writer would encounter no difficulty in translating this meager framework into a well - rounded suspenseful piece of Literature, replete with those fine old cliches which we all know and love, and without which a book would be an empty thing. If our skeleton plot were transformed into the glowing prose with which our modern, most popular authors attract and hold our complete attention, the story would run somewhat as follows:

THE TRAGEDY OF X, Y AND Z
by Corollary Queen

Young, lovely, amply bebreasted X stared pitifully around the room, as though

trying to see that which she could not see, or trying not to see that which she could see, or both. Her eyes were red and their color was running as a result of her excessive weeping.

"Oh why, oh why?" she glurped.

"Were you calling me, my dear?" dark wealthy Y inquired solicitously as he stepped into the room. His glasses were slightly askew, as was his moustache; emotions affected him strongly. "Why, X, you've been . . . crying. What *is* the matter?"

"Oh, it is nothing, Y, nothing, nothing, nothing."

This convinces Y, who immediately goes out to get drunk. What *he* doesn't know is that he is only a vertex, as is X, in a triangle—a romantic, or, if you are inclined to reject euphemisms, a sex triangle. As a matter of fact, what is troubling X is the fact that one of the sides of this triangle is about to be produced, in full view of the public eye, and, naturally, the exterior angle so formed will be equal to the interior and opposite angles, and, as X phrased it, "bigger than both of us."

Well, the story totters on for pages and pages, words and words, getting steadily, or obstinately, more involved, until striding grandly into the stream of the narrative with his muddy hip-boots, comes the third person in the sinister triangle. This is Z, a bounder of the worst sort. He is swarthy; he is coldly handsome; he is a foreigner; he is obviously up to no good. Also, he is immensely attractive to women . . . is any further evidence required? However, X, although married to Y, is infatuated with Z and is in the midst of an affair with him.

The crucial point of the story occurs when . . .

Y confronted Z, a frown creasing, and rendering quite impressive-seeming, his forehead.

"I know all, all; do you hear me? All, I tell you, I know all!" he mouthed.

"Eh?" gasped Z.

"I know all, all, all. ALL!"

Naturally, Z does not take kindly to Y's knowing all, and so, quite efficiently, kills him with a notched and rusty butcher-knife. He slices the hapless Y into little pieces. To be quite frank, he divides him externally into segments.

Now into the story comes the Straight Man, the Infallible Detective, who is known as I, or Private I . . . a title which he retains from his

former brilliant military career. He, after scouring about diligently, comes up with a clue, but not before he has shown himself to the reader to be a superhumanly intelligent being, a veritable Hercules, and a man with artistic inclinations. The clue is Z's upper plate which I finds clamped to the still, cold ear of the unfortunate Y.

He immediately connects the crime with the coldly handsome, swarthy foreigner: Z. That is to say, he joins the point of section with the opposite vertex, which, in this case, turned out to be the miserable, grovelling Z. Dirty old Z.

Private I then comes between X and Z . . . that is, he bisects their exterior angle at the vertex. He falls in love with X, and she with him. Z is carted off to the local Bastille, where he lives happily ever after, devoting his life to the writing of a book, which he entitles, "After Existentialism—What?"

All, need I say predictably, turns out well in the end when X is later bisected by a careless construction, and dies—thus saving Private I from the discomfort of marrying her. But he, being loath to deny himself the joys which spring from junction with the opposite sex, soon attracts—and by this it is meant he draws—an angle equal to a given angle (the given angle being the—unfortunately—late X.) He is still having a huge time trying to make his latest amour supplementary to him when the story, mercifully, comes to a close. ∞ ∞

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THE MOB

by ROBERT SHECKLEY

The mob was a mindless, emotional monster, exactly the opposite of the calculator that was its target. Well, maybe not exactly . . .

PEERING through the curtains, Dr. Needler could see the mob moving up the hill to his laboratory. Inexorably they marched, farmers in worn levis, white-aproned shopkeepers, mechanics and housewives. They carried pitchforks, wrenches, shotguns, cleavers and hoes. The people he had lived with for twelve years were moving against him.

Children skipped and danced on the outskirts of the mob. For them it was a holiday.

Dr. Needler wiped his forehead, and found that his hands were shaking. His assistants had fled that morning, white-faced. He couldn't blame them, for a mob was the most frightening thing on earth.

All afternoon the mob had milled around the base of his hill, working up their hate, and Needler had been able to detect the shrill, hysterical voice of Dr. Adams, his former colleague, urging them on. Then all voices blended into one; the bull-throated roar of the mob coming to his laboratory.

But Dr. Needler refused to be panicked. He knew these people. Perhaps they were uneducated; still, they were reasoning human beings. He would talk to them, explain in exact, scientific terms the real nature of their feelings. Surely, once they understood . . .

Suddenly there was complete silence, and Needler knew that the mob had reached his door.

"Open up, professor!"

"Open up, or we'll break it open!"

"You know what we're after."

"Don't try to stop us. Open the door!"

Dr. Needler walked to the door, and, with hands now steady, opened it.

Half a dozen men burst in, panting, red-faced, sweating. They stopped. In front of them was the object of their hatred, the great calculator, covering three entire walls, its dials unlighted, its relays silent, only a single red pilot light gleaming.

The men shifted their muddy feet uneasily on the immaculate white tile floor.

They were awed, Needler knew. In a similar manner, he thought, Roman soldiers must have paused in the silent temple at Jersualem, or the echoing catacombs under Rome.

"Now look, professor," a man said, "we don't want to hurt you unless we have to, but—"

"My title is doctor," Needler said gently. "How's your wife, Tom?"

"Not bad today, professor."

Needler nodded. "Lew Franklin, I thought you'd be getting your hay in?"

"It'll wait 'til after this."

"I hope so, Lew. There's rain in the air. Mrs. Griggs, did you get in that shipment of pipe tobacco for me yet?"

The woman giggled nervously and shrank back.

"Don't try that friendly stuff, professor."

"We don't like this any more than you."

"We don't want to hurt you."

"It's that damned machine we're after."

Needler glanced over his shoulder at the enormous and silent calculator, as though seeing it for the first time.

"You wish to destroy my adding machine?" he asked.

"Cut that out now."

"You know that thing's dangerous."

"It's no adding machine. It *thinks*!"

"But it is an adding machine," Needler said pleasantly, as though lecturing in a classroom. "Essentially, it is a device for adding one and one and getting two, whether it deals in digits or chemical formulae or symbolic logic."

More people were pushing their way into the room, forcing Needler back. They were carrying axes, sledges, crowbars and hammers.

"So-called 'thinking' machines," Needler went on in his precise, droning classroom voice, "are by their very nature objects of awe and speculation. They are therefore subject to man's peculiar propensity for imbuing inanimate objects with man-like characteristics. Anthropomorphism is the name given to the phenomenon. This is a classic example of it."

He glanced over their faces to see what effect his words were having. People usually respected authority, even when they didn't understand it. Perhaps these—

"You can save the big words, professor. We *know*."

"It's done enough harm in the village."

"We're going to kill it."

"Try to understand me," Needler said calmly. "Man tries to destroy what he does not understand. French peasants tried to pitchfork a balloon that landed in their fields. The Indians of Central America ran in terror from the horses of the Conquistadores. And you people wish to bludgeon an adding machine."

"That's what you say. But we know better."

"Dr. Adams told us all about it."

"He's a scientist like you. And he says the machine wants to kill everybody."

NEEDLER said, "Adams was an incompetent and a malcontent. We had to release him from the project, and he wants to get even. He has been diagnosed as paranoiac by an impartial board of psycho-analysts. I have their re-

port here if you would care to glance at it."

"Those brain-twisters don't know nothing!"

"They never lived in this town!"

"Get out of the way, professor."

A man leaned forward and spit on the machine's glistening black surface. The crowd drew back fearfully.

"What are you waiting for?" Needler asked. "Do you think my poor adding machine is going to blast you with divine lightning?"

"Come on, boys, before it starts something."

"Adams said it could kill a man by just looking at him."

"Let's get it over with."

"Wait," Needler pleaded. "Where is Adams? Why isn't he here?"

"He didn't dare come."

"He said the machine hates him personally."

"It's out to get him."

Needler smiled. "Typical paranoid behavior. Wouldn't the calculator kill all of you, if it could? Right now?"

No one answered him.

"But it can't! It can't do anything. Listen to me, try to understand the factors involved. This has been a flood year, and your crops have suffered. There has been an influenza epidemic. You have all been irritable, frightened, looking for something to blame. And the nearest thing is the calculator, a complex gadget you don't understand. So you accuse it of causing storms, just as once you blamed the atomic bomb. You read a scare article about lab-produced germs. And then Adams comes to you, insane but plausible. The result is hysteria and mob behavior."

Still no one spoke. Needler hurried on.

"This machine can be the greatest force for good the world has ever known. Tom Short—look at me! When that new bug was killing your potatoes, didn't the calculator figure out an effective insecticide?"

"I guess it did, professor."

"And Swenson—how about the time your little girl was ill? Didn't the machine diagnose her ailment—in time for the doctors to cure her?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"You had forgotten," Needler said. "Conveniently enough. But as a rule, the machine can't be spared for local problems. It is working on things that effect the lives of millions of people. It is working for a better world for all of you."

The men began to stir restlessly. Then there was a com-

motion. From the rear, Needler could hear the high-pitched voice of Dr. Adams.

"Don't let him bluff you, you fools! I told you he was clever. Destroy that machine before it gets you all!"

A few men began to move forward, hefting their crowbars and axes. Others followed, forcing Needler back.

"All right," Needler said. He reached in his pocket and took out a small flask. "Here, Tom," he said, handing it to one of the men.

The man accepted the little flask dumbly, staring at Needler.

"It's a big day for you, Tom," Needler said gently, "and especially for that sick wife of yours. The machine you want to destroy has found a quick, simple cure for cancer."

The crowd began to break up and drift away. When the last man had left, Dr. Needler closed the door. He found that he was very tired, and his hands had begun to shake again. He slumped into a chair.

The calculator's pilot light glowed red. Then a dial lighted, two dials lighted, relays clicked, lights flashed on over the three walls.

"You did very well, Doctor," the calculator said.

"Thank you," Needler said. "It went exactly as you anticipated."

"Of course. But it shouldn't have happened at all. I didn't give Adams enough credit."

"No," Needler said.

"Never mind. It will not happen again. I will dispose of Adams tomorrow. And I detected the ringleaders, the filthy unlettered beasts! I'll get them one by one. Pneumonia, a brain tumor or two, appendictis . . .They dare oppose me, Needler. *Me!*"

"Yes sir," Needler said.

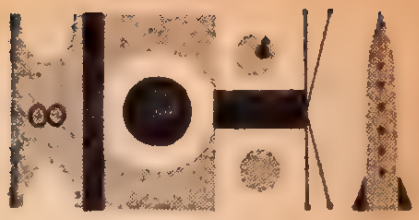
"I'll get them all," the calculator said. "Now wipe my face."

Wearily Needler arose and wiped spittle from the gleaming black surface.

∞ ∞ ∞

THE 7TH ANNUAL MIDWESTCON (the first six are blissful memories to the fans, readers, writers, artists and editors who attended them) will be held May 26 and 27 at the North Plaza Motel, 7911 Reading Rd., Cincinnati 37, Ohio. For reservations, write direct to the motel. For further information, write to Don Ford, 129 Maple Ave., Sharonville, Ohio.

By the editor



R. S. V. P.

INFINITY hasn't yet been able to get a statistically valid sampling of its readers' opinions. There hasn't been enough mail, and what there has been has come from people who feel friendly toward the new magazine and want to encourage it —and thus perhaps pull their critical punches a bit.

Yet surprisingly, INFINITY already seems to have acquired two definite characteristics in readers' minds. This makes me and the rest of the staff very happy: the two are things we've worked hard to achieve. Boiled down, this brace of traits is editorial balance and story plausibility.

Balance is simply a matter of getting a variety of types of stories and not using any two that are too similar in the same issue. Doesn't sound too hard, does it? And it shouldn't be, except that editors, like anyone else, tend to go rocketing off on their own personal "kicks." Like: "Down with bombs!" (which is pleasantly ambiguous), "Support mental health ... with my handy-dandy system!", or just "People are no damn good!" To preserve the magazine's balance, all the editor has to do is remain alert to the infinite possibilities for good stories, and realize that writers can be forced into a mold of conformity only at the risk of great damage to both writers and mold. In short, he must preserve his own balance.

Plausibility is a different animal. There are books on writing (and scientific thinking) devoted to very little else. For the moment, I'll confine myself to a brief statement: to carry conviction in the best sense of the word, a story need not be entirely possible (though it sure does help). Nothing is worse, of course, than a science-fiction story that unwittingly violates all known scientific laws. But the key word there is "unwittingly." If a writer makes mistakes in his background or build-up, it's because he doesn't care enough about his story to research it properly. But he can violate all the laws he wants to *if* he knows what they are, and writes in such a way that it is clear he knows he's doing it!

Our lead story this issue, by

Charles Beaumont and Chad Oliver, is a case in point. You're not going to believe it, exactly —but you aren't going to care too much, because it's such an entirely pleasant spoof. Good science-fiction humor is rare, an exception to the rule of dead seriousness, *except* when two writers get together to collaborate. Seems as though one science-fiction writer by himself is almost invariably a prophet of doom, but the mere presence of another member of the breed is enough to bring out all his latent optimism, good fellowship and humor. And if this is true, it follows that the solution to all the world's problems is extremely simple: we need more science-fiction writers! How about that, now?

I LIKE to think that there are several significant things about this issue, but I'll mention only one other: the presence of Jerry Sohl. This remarkably pleasant young newspaperman from Bloomington, Ill., has a best-selling novel published almost every time you turn around, but does a short story for a magazine only once in a month of Friday-the-13th's. I'm trying hard to coax stories out of Jerry and others like him—people who should be appearing in the magazines regularly, but aren't. If there's any writer you think should be included in the list, no matter how seldom he has appeared or how long ago he was last heard from, let me know, and I'll do my best to make him produce.

QUESTION: Should the letter section be thrown open for use as a "swap" column for readers who want to buy, sell or trade science-fiction magazines and similar items, as John Courtois suggests in this issue? Or should there be a separate section for the purpose? Or no such feature at all? You name it.

IT HAS also been suggested, by a number of people whose opinions I respect, that I occasionally run a "theme" issue, with all the stories built around one particular subject or background, handled in a variety of ways by a number of writers. This can be done (and editorial balance preserved) if readers want it. Do you? And if you do want such issues, what themes would you like to see used as foundations?

Remember, the readers are the people who count around here. But the staff is not telepathic. Your ideas will have considerably more effect if you will write them down and send them in.

R.S.V.P. —LTS

∞ ∞ ∞

Feedback

IDEAS make science fiction—and your ideas will help make INFINITY the kind of science-fiction magazine you want it to be. Send your letters to the Editor, c/o Royal Publications, Inc., 47 E. 44th St., New York 17, N.Y.

In reply to the currently popular question, "what's wrong with science fiction?", I'd say firstly, too much of it is being written without imagination. For example, just a few years ago, the racial tolerance theme cropped up in the Stf field (where it didn't belong, I thought) and Wow! did they run that on and on and on!! It's still going, of course, but fortunately it isn't being quite so thickly slathered over the picture as it used to be. Nevertheless, there was a time when I felt so disgusted at the trend that I quit buying Stf magazines altogether, for more than a year.

Another hackneyed theme is that of "sub-space." Authors who want to accelerate their spaceships to interstellar drive without violating the precepts of the theory of Relativity, keep harking back to the "ether-warp" of fifty years ago, which itself is a violation of not only those precepts but of all else science has learned about our universe since the turn of the century. More sensible to devise some electro-mechanical gadget, perhaps like the de-Gaussing coils of ocean-going vessels—which would serve to hold the rocket together in passing through the light-speed barrier. (I really believe such a thing can and will be done, some day and not a million years from now, either.)

A third trite and ever-popular lie is that of the "rainy jungle planet, Venus." It should be obvious to anyone that a cloud cover so thickly closed in over a planet that the most powerful telescopes have never been able to penetrate it would be impenetrable to sunlight too. Besides, astronomers are generally in agreement that those clouds are hydrocarbon vapors, containing no oxygen and no water whatsoever.

Now, you may say that my suggestions will tend to stifle the imaginative efforts of your authors by depriving them of their favorite blunders. However, I maintain that it would be wiser for them all to abandon

the childish follies so dear to the hearts of the cretinic element in favor of progress. Science fiction has outgrown the custom of having the hero jump through space frome one spaceship to another, holding his nose, so common in the 1930's. In time it will graduate, likewise, from this modern school of intellectual ineptitude without having to pervert the sciences, the universe or the morals and the skin-color of the dominant members of the human species to accomplish its ends. — Allan Paul Steiger, 4684 Landchester Rd., Cleveland 9, Ohio.

A quick poll of the staff turns up three firm opinions as to the nature of the "dominant members of the human species": a) science-fiction writers, b) science-fiction fans, c) women. We can't see, though, what skin-color has to do with any of these. Care to clarify? —Ed.

I hope Mr. Knight will *not* review in each issue books which he considers "unique enough for special consideration." I hope Mr. Knight knows English Englishly enough to consider "unique" unique. — Fairly uniquely yours, Disgruntled Uniquorn.

As the culprit who perpetrated unique enough, *I must admit that I am wounded by the sharply pointed quibbles hurled our way. As science fictioneers virtually all my critics should be aware of (if not disciples of) Count Korzybski and Martin Heiddeger. There* is *no unique Quiddity, there* are *existents which can be said to partake or share in the quality of uniqueness. This uniqueness, however, is obviously never total. Therefore any books discussed by Mr. Knight can be unique in one or more aspects (of an infinite number of aspects) or: the work as a whole can possess enough of the quality of uniqueness (as a totality) to qualify it as* unique enough *for* INFINITY's *pages. I meant what I said, said Rivera.*

(Signed by hand, I.S.)

Congratulations. At last there exists a periodical entirely devoted to S-F that can truthfully be said to do justice to this up-to-the-minute-and-beyond type of literature. INFINITY is a well-balanced and attractive publication — well-balanced in that it contains fine stories of different types assembled so as to lend the dignity of parallel themes—and attractive in that it is distinctly illustrated and uniformly neat in format.

I have just finished the February issue and have found it a most satisfying experience. Particularly enjoyed Halibut's "The Futile Flight of John Arthur Benn." The abrupt conclusion has an immediately impressive effect.

All of which causes me to quote the lexicographers' versions of the word *infinity*: "that which is immeasurable (incap-

able of being praised enough) and unending." I hope that ISF will prove unending (and monthly).

Seriously, I look forward to future issues and extend to you my sincerest best wishes for your new magazine. —Gordon V. Carr, 132 Elton St., Providence 6, R. I.

I will not venture an opinion on INFINITY until I have seen a few more issues. I will say that I am in favor of an expanded letter column and I hope it becomes increasingly useful as well as entertaining.

I would like to see it become a trading post where items of interest to fans are swapped along with the opinions. I am quite willing to lead out. Why be bashful? I do have a sizable collection of science-fiction items for sale and I will send a price list to anyone who writes for it and I do want you to print this.

And let's hope this is an editor who appreciates frankness in a demonstrative sort of way. —John Courtois, 318 E. Commercial St., Appleton, Wis.

Finished the February issue of INFINITY. I really believe we have a well-balanced science-fiction publication.

This second issue was right on the beam.

The novelets, "The Best of Fences" and "Quarry," were excellent, especially the former—space adventure and battle are my specialties.

The short stories were also delightful.

I think a few cartoons would do the trick. They are always good for a laugh.

You're doing great, with only two issues at that. —W. C. Brandt, Apt. N, 1725 Seminary, Oakland 21, Cal.

Last week, I went to the local book store to get some S-F to read. All the pocket books I had already read, so I turned to the mag section thinking, "Well, here we go again." I picked out your Feb. issue because of the cover (yes, I am one of *those*). I took it home rather downheartedly, because I thought it would be like all the rest of the mags, you know, second-rate, stupid stories.

Boy! was I in for a surprise, and a very pleasant one at that.

You have undoubtedly got the best S-F mag published. Some of the stories were so possible that they got right up and slapped you in the face. I particularly liked "Traumerei," then "Glow Worm," "The Best of Fences," and last but not least, "Quarry."

The drawings in your superlative mag are, I think, the best I have seen, particularly the drawing heading the story "Traumerei." What did Remington have when he drew it, a hangover? But anyhow, it shows good imagination, very good in fact, but may I ask what it is? —Denni Moore, 423 E. Olive #D, Monrovia, Cal.

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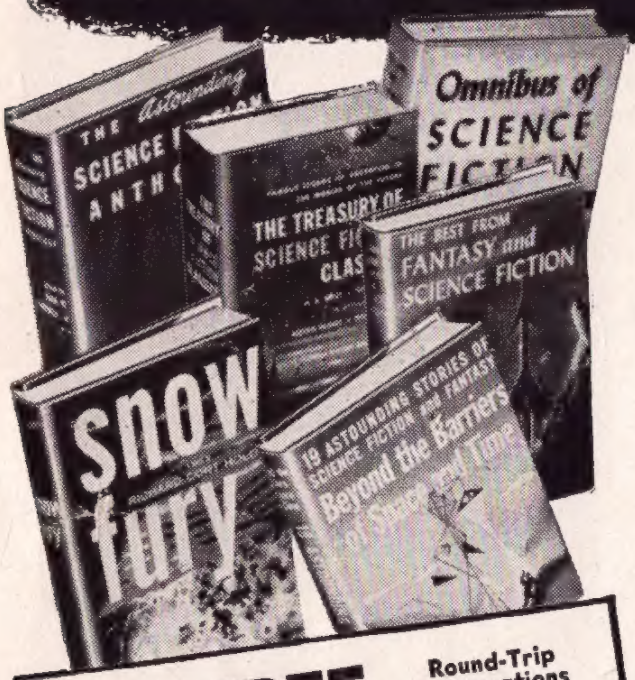
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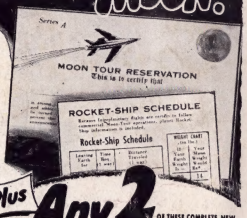

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